

The Queen's Quest by JoMo3

Category: Stranger Things (TV 2016)

Genre: F/M, Gen, Other Additional Tags to Be Added

Language: English

Characters: Dustin Henderson, Eleven | Jane Hopper, Jim "Chief" Hopper, Kali Prasad, Lucas Sinclair, Maxine "Max" Mayfield, Mike Wheeler, Murray Bauman, Robin (Stranger Things), Steve Harrington, Will Byers

Relationships: Eleven | Jane Hopper & Jim "Chief" Hopper, Eleven | Jane Hopper/Mike Wheeler, Robin Buckley & Steve Harrington

Status: Completed

Published: 2019-04-15

Updated: 2021-07-12

Packaged: 2022-03-31 11:22:50

Rating: Not Rated

Warnings: Creator Chose Not To Use Archive Warnings

Chapters: 11

Words: 53,035

Publisher: archiveofourown.org

Summary:

It's the summer of '85, and the party has reunited as Eleven finally gets to leave the cabin. Meanwhile, Starcourt Mall has officially opened, bringing joy (and something else) to the small town. And with all the excitement that summer brings, something's wrong with Eleven...

1. The Dream

Author's Note:

This story is a sort-of follow up to my story "Return of the Queen."

February 18, 1985

The black town car slowly came to a stop, jerking slightly as the driver put the car in park. The mayor's assistant, in the passenger side seat, turned around and looked to his boss. "Are you ready, sir?"

Mayor Larry Kline sat in the backseat, looking out at the scattered workers outside in the brisk weather. It was an unusually warm February; cold, but not too cold. Still, he was surprised these men were working.

"Do I really have to do this?" the Mayor asked.

"It's good PR," his aide said, shrugging his shoulders. "Besides, Hawkins Lab made the city look bad, this is a step in the right direction."

Mayor Kline sighed. "That stupid lab." With another sigh, he buttoned up his coat. "Fine. Let's do this."

They climbed from the car, the mayor putting on a big smile for the assembled press and citizens of Hawkins. They stood in the area that was once home to Hawkins Lab; it'd now been torn down and was being outfitted into a shopping mall. Today was the day they were going to break ground.

"Mayor Kline, thank you for coming," Mason Wedmore, the man who'd purchased the land, said.

"It's my pleasure," the mayor responded, shaking his hand. Putting his hands back in his pockets, Mayor Kline looked around them at the empty plot of land. The lab had been torn down quickly last December, and by January a bidding war had begun, with Mason Wedmore, a businessman who'd become rich constructing malls on the east coast, ultimately

winning it. "So...today's the big day."

Mason nodded, a smile spreading on his face. "You know, I've opened up four of these things, and I get nervous every time."

Mayor Kline nodded, returning the smile. "You don't think it's too soon? I mean surely you read about the gas leak..."

"Mister Mayor, we have checked and rechecked this thing," Mason said, waving it off. "We're gonna be fine."

"Mister Mayor," his aide interrupted, "This way, please."

"Excuse me," Mayor Kline said, leaving behind Wedmore and walking with his aide. He was led to an open area, where he saw a few other of the town's key figures: there was councilwoman Betsy Milidonis, who he gave a nod to. There was local businessman Donald Melvald, as well as one of the police deputies.

"Mister Mayor," the deputy said, shaking his hand. "Nice to see you here."

"Anything for our great town," Kline said. Then, curious, he asked "The chief's not here?"

"Oh, no," the officer, whose name tag said Callahan answered, "He couldn't be here, so he sent me instead."

"Oh. Well, tell him I said hi, will you?"

"Will do."

Eventually the mayor, councilwoman, deputy, as well as Melvald, Wedmore, and two other people the mayor didn't recognize were all given ceremonial shovels, and the group stood with them posed over a hunk of dirt. A photo was taken, then everyone began to go their separate ways.

Before he left, Mayor Kline stopped Mason Wedmore. "You really think you'll have this up by the summer?" he asked.

Mason nodded his head. "Definitely. I've been doing this for ten years, sir; and never gotten behind schedule. I told you June, it'll be up by June."

“Okay,” Mayor Kline agreed. “I hope so. I’ve got a town full of people who’re counting on you.”

Mason smiled. “Trust me, Mister Mayor. This mall’s gonna bring nothing but good things to Hawkins.”

During the first twelve years of her life, Eleven had never allowed herself to believe there was anything outside the walls of the lab. Everything she ever needed, or could ever want, had to have been inside that building.

Food? The lab.

Something to do every day? The lab.

A “father” that “loved” her? Papa (via the lab).

It wasn’t until she’d left that horrible place that she got to discover that there was more to life than just tiled walls, dark rooms, and science experiments. There were people besides the lab coat and suit wearing workers she’d always seen. That Papa wasn’t really so much a “father” as he was a controlling figure. That love, that real, actual love, did exist, and that people could value *her* , and not just the powers she had.

It wasn’t until she was outside the lab that she found out what friends truly were, and that her abilities didn’t define her (not to say they didn’t come in handy from time to time).

If, during the first twelve years of her life, she’d ever let herself think there was a whole world out there with kind people who would welcome her, she’d have thought it was one of the fairy tales Papa used to read to her at night. Or, better yet, that it was just a dream she’d had. But now she was out, and the dream was a reality.

She had a home, a *real* home; not just a dark room with a hospital-like bed. She had a room she had made her own, a TV, and all the Eggo waffles she could eat.

She had a family, a *real* family. She had a father in Jim Hopper. Even

though they had their ups and downs, she knew she loved him and that he loved her, and that he was much better at being a dad than Papa ever was.

She had people who cared about her. She would always be upset that she never got to know her mother, not as she once was, but she had an aunt who checked in on her from time to time, and she had a mother figure in her life in Joyce Byers.

She had friends. Lucas, Dustin, Will, and Max. Friends that she treasured more than almost anything else, who thought her powers were “cool,” but didn’t value them over her actual self.

And finally, she had Mike; one of the first people to see beyond her abilities and see her as the frightened girl she had been. The first to see she just needed a friend and to be loved.

And knowing that she now had that love from her friends and from her family made El the happiest she’d ever been.

And now, seven months after closing the Gate, she felt as if her life was finally taking shape. There hadn’t been any signs of evil in the small town of Hawkins. No “bad men” or employees of the Power and Light department patrolling the city. No otherworldly beings intent on attacking or possessing citizens. No monsters in search of blood or pet cats. It was all quiet on the western front.

And it was because of that quiet that Jim Hopper decided it might be okay to test the waters on El’s freedom. He had been considering it over the past few months. With Hawkins Lab destroyed, as well as no investigators searching the small town for a Russian girl, he thought it might be safe to let Eleven out on a trial run. He knew things had been hard on her. The first year was bad enough, but he was still haunted by the way her face had fallen when he’d told her she’d have to lay low for *another* year. The Snowball had been an exception, one that she’d been thankful for. And after the first month of re-hiding, he’d caved and let her friends visit once a week; not traveling

together, and not at the same times. Joyce had said he was being overly paranoid, but he begged to differ. He loved El, and he'd be damned if he was going to put her in danger.

He knew how bad she wanted to be out there, with her friends. He could see the longing in her eyes as she watched them leave on their weekly visits. And Mike. Holy crap, Mike Wheeler.

It was obvious that the two had a special relationship (he'd hated when El began throwing around the word "boyfriend"). But that didn't stop El from calling him on the walkie he'd gotten her damn near every night. And when he was over, the two were joined at the hip, even with their friends nearby. Days he couldn't make it or wasn't at the cabin, Hopper was constantly peppered with "Can Mike come over?" so much so that he was ready to ground her for asking again.

But she deserved some happiness. For all she did for this small town, for all she'd done for *him*, she deserved a normal life, or what could pass as one.

So he'd had another talk with Dr. Owens at the same bar, getting the doc's opinion, and now was all set to tell her the news.

It was a Friday morning when he decided to tell her. He was already up and at the stove as she made her way out of her room.

"Hey, you're up early," he said over his shoulder.

"Yes," she said quietly, taking a seat at the table.

"Why don't you set up, breakfast'll be ready in a minute."

She nodded, getting up and getting out plates and silverware for their meal. He was over a moment later, scooping scrambled eggs onto her plate.

"Anything wrong?" he asked. Her face looked gloomy.

"No," she muttered, pushing at her eggs.

He joined her, sitting across from her. "You sure?"

She nodded.

Hopper sniffed, then began to eat his food. He knew why she was gloomy. Today was officially the first day of summer; the Hawkins Public Schools had had their last day of classes yesterday. Last night he'd heard her on the walkie with Mike, the two talking in quiet voices in hopes that neither of their parents would hear.

Mike: So we're out of school, now. Maybe Hopper will let us come over more. Or maybe...never mind.

El: What?

Mike: I was gonna say...maybe he'll let you come see us.

El: a sigh, then He still says it's not safe.

Mike: But it's been almost a year. There's so many things to do in the summer, El. The Fourth of July Parade, the pool...they're even opening up the mall this week!

El: Mall?

Mike: Yeah, remember? It's like a big store that you go to. I...I was hoping we could go together. Steve's got a job at the ice cream place. I thought maybe you and me could get a cone sometime.

El: another sigh, then Hopper won't let me go.

Mike: I know. It's not fair.

Hopper had turned up the television after that, giving them their privacy.

Sitting at the table now, he chewed a couple of bites, then decided to get on with it. "So there was something I wanted to talk to you about."

She glanced up, curious.

"I was thinking," he began, "That maybe it wouldn't be too bad if you got out some."

She looked confused, then awareness began to dawn on her. "Out some? Like...with friends?"

"Yep," Hopper replied, nodding. "With friends."

A huge smile came to her face, but Hopper put up a hand, slowing down her excitement. "Not *every* day, now," he told her. "But maybe we can try a few times a week."

She jumped out of her chair, and ran over and wrapped her arms around him in a hug. He grinned, and put one of his own arms around her.

"Thank you," she said into his shoulder.

"I know it's been hard," he said to her as she slowly let go. "But I think it's pretty safe now, so let's just try this a day at a time, alright?"

She nodded, still smiling, as she sat back in her chair.

"But there's gonna be *rules*, you understand?"

"More rules?"

"Yeah. Let's call them our...Don't Be Stupid Rules, Part Two, okay?"

"Okay..."

"Good."

"Can I go see my friends?"

"What, now?" he asked. She nodded.

Hopper chuckled. "Let's eat first, okay? Then I'll tell you about the rules, then you can go ahead and tell your friends all about it."

Twenty minutes later, Eleven sat eagerly at the table as Hopper brought a sheet of paper with him. As he sat he turned it around, showing Eleven the new rules for her to follow.

1. *I need to know where you are at all times.*

Eleven nodded, eager for him to continue, but he paused, stressing the importance of this rule.

“I don’t care where I am,” he told her, a serious look on his face. “I need to know that if necessary, I can come and get you; you understand?”

She nodded, but he continued.

“That means if you tell me you’re going to Mike’s, you don’t change your mind and go to...I don’t know, the park or something, without telling me. Understand?”

“Yes,” she answered.

1. *Always have someone with you.*

“Never be by yourself,” he told her. “That means if I can’t pick you up for any reason, have Mike or his mom or somebody drive you. I don’t want you going off on your own.”

“What about the bathroom?” she asked, curious.

Hopper snorted a laugh, and said “No, that’s fine.”

1. *Never go out at night.*

“The times I let you go, it’s always gonna have to be in the daytime, alright? That means no sleepovers or anything, no late night movies, none of that.” When she started to say something, he put up a hand, adding “Look, I’m not saying this’ll never change. But for now we need to keep things careful, okay?”

She nodded, but some of her excitement seemed to have ebbed away.

“It’s just for now,” he reminded her. “Let’s see how this goes, and maybe we can work on changing things, alright?”

“Yes,” she responded.

“Okay. Go and call your friends, then.”

Eleven rushed into her room, searching frantically for her walkie. Excited wasn’t a good enough word to describe how she felt at the moment. *She got to go out! She got to see her friends! She got to see Mike!*

That last thought brought a blush to her face, as she recounted his last visit; the two of them sitting on her bed, as he worked on homework and she read a book. She’d asked him to explain a word, he had, and then the two found themselves leaning in to share a kiss. Which, of course, had been interrupted as Hopper had come home.

Yes, they had kissed at the Snowball, as well as more times since then, but it still made her... *tingly* ...whenever they kissed; as well as whenever she thought of Mike.

Speaking of which...

Turning on the walkie, she called his name: “Mike? It’s El. Are...are you there?”

There was nothing but static for a few moments, but then she heard

his voice, sounding as if he'd been running. "El? Yeah. I'm here. Hi."

She smiled as she heard him trying to catch his breath. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah! Yeah, I..." more heavy breathing, "I was upstairs in the kitchen when I heard you call. Is everything okay?"

Of course, I'm talking to you, she thought but didn't say. Instead, she said "Um...Hopper told me something."

"Okay..."

"I can come out. I can come see you."

There was no response, and she was afraid she'd lost the signal. Pressing down the button to talk, she asked, "Mike? Are you there?"

An excited voice answered her, as a smile came back to her face. "Yeah! El, I'm here. Holy crap! Really? That's awesome!"

She giggled, thrilled at his excitement.

"How're you gonna get...do you want to do something right now? Can...can I come get you?"

She found herself nodding, even though she knew he couldn't see her. "Yes."

"Okay! I'll be right there, El! Over and out!"

She clicked off, her smile growing wider. She wondered what they'd do today. Would it just be she and Mike? Or would their friends come, too?

Turning, she saw Hopper standing in the doorway, putting his gun on his holster.

"Well?" he asked.

"Mike is coming here."

He nodded. "Rule number one?"

She shrugged, not knowing yet where they'd be.

"Alright," Hopper said. "Hopefully Mike will have an idea."

Mike all but tripped over himself as he scrambled to put on his shoes.
Eleven got to leave the cabin . Eleven got to leave the cabin!!

It was something he'd been hoping for for a while, and now the dream was a reality. He knew he should call his friends, and tell them the good news. But they'd want to come with him, and he wanted to be the one to bring El into town.

Was it selfish? Probably. But right now, he didn't care.

He sprinted upstairs, his mother giving him a funny look as he sped through the kitchen.

"Mike? What's wrong?" she asked him.

"Nothing, mom! I'll be back in a little while!" he called over his shoulder.

When he got outside, he picked up his bike and started pedaling immediately, his mind running through what they could do today. The arcade? The park? The pool?

His friends would all have ideas of what they could do, but he'd let them know once he brought El back to his house.

El was coming to his house .

He still couldn't believe it, that she got to leave. He could finally show off his girlfriend.

Girlfriend...

They hadn't officially had *that* talk yet, though everyone assumed

they had. Just last week at lunch, Max had brought it up, making Mike's face go red.

You haven't asked her to be your girlfriend yet, Wheeler? Jesus, what's wrong with you?

He started to bring up that it'd taken Lucas three months to pluck up the courage to ask Max, but that didn't really help Mike's argument; he'd known El far longer than three months.

If he was honest, he'd love nothing more than to just sit in the basement with her, sitting in the still-there fort and talking, watching movies, etc.

But what would she want to do? Honestly, he didn't care; whatever El wanted to do, he was all in. He still couldn't believe she got to come out today, it was like a dream come true.

He arrived at the cabin in record time, his legs tired from the pace of his pedaling. As he made his way through the woods, walking his bike, he saw the cabin in the distance.

El. Coming over.

He could hardly wait.

2. Real Life

March 21, 1985

Mason Wedmore made his way through the still-under-construction future site of the Hawkins Mall. So far, they hadn't come up with a name with it; Mason had a long list of things to do, and titling the mall was not at the top. He was on-site today because Ryan Evans, the foreman on the project, had called him yesterday, saying there was something he needed to see.

"Can't you just tell me what it is?" Mason had asked on the phone.

"I think you need to see this," Ryan had said.

So Mason had made the drive into Hawkins from Columbus, and now here he was, patrolling the site for Ryan.

"Mr. Wedmore," he heard a voice call, and sure enough, there Ryan stood, about fifteen feet in front of him.

"What was so important," Mason began, "That you couldn't tell me over the phone, Evans?"

"It's...the foundation, sir," Ryan said, beginning to walk. Mason sighed, figuring he was supposed to follow him.

"What about it?" Mason followed Ryan to an elevator. Ryan didn't say anything until after he'd pushed the button, beginning their descent.

"We were drilling, you know, putting in the basement of the mall. This whole land, it's very...hilly, and we're trying to level it out."

"And...?"

"Sorry. And we found these...tunnels. It's quite something, sir."

"Underground tunnels? What's so important about that?"

"They're kind of strange, to be honest." Evans got quiet for a second before he softly said "But there's something else, too."

"What do you mean, something else?"

"You...you need to see it for yourself, sir."

Pausing, Mason then asked "How deep are we going?"

Evans didn't say anything at first, then finally said "We're almost there."

That didn't answer the question, Mason thought.

After a moment the elevator landed at its destination. Mason blinked at the sight in front of him. There were tunnels, sure, which would have been fascinating all on their own. They spread out in about four different directions, and could possibly go on for miles.

But no, that wasn't what caused Mason to stop dead in his tracks.

What caused that were the bodies. There appeared to be about a dozen or so carcasses, all in various stages of decay, spread around the empty space before the tunnels.

"What...what are they?" he asked Ryan Evans.

Shifting the hard hat above his head, Ryan answered, saying "Best we could tell, they're dogs. They're about the size of 'em. Except...they don't exactly look like dogs, sir."

Mason and Ryan inched towards one, and Mason saw what he meant-one of the dog creatures had a flower-like mouth where it's head should be.

"What do you think it is, exactly?" Ryan asked.

Mason shook his head. "I heard about the lab doing all kinds of sick stuff, but this..."

Ryan frowned. "You think this was the lab, sir?"

"What else could it have been? Have you tried calling the sheriff?"

"I've tried, but he's always busy, it seems." The two men backed away

from the dead dog. "Look, the other men, they're kind of spooked about this. And besides that, we don't know what to do with these..." He nodded his head towards the impromptu graveyard, "Things."

Mason paused before responding. He'd never been late putting up a mall, and he didn't want Hawkins to be his first failure. "Bury them," he answered. "Or burn them, or something. Let me talk to the police. Get the men back to work. Whatever you have to do."

"Yes sir," Ryan said, nodding.

Wanting to get away from the eerie scene before him, Mason said "Let's go back up, shall we?"

Ryan seemed eager to get away as well, so the two men made their way back to the elevator.

Inside the cabin, Jim Hopper tapped his foot, slowly running out of patience. Eleven, meanwhile, sat at the table, a look of eagerness all over her face.

"Did Mike say *when* he would be here?" he asked.

El shook her head, responding with "He's coming."

Hopper huffed. He had to be at work soon, and wanted El to be on her way before *he* was on his way. He knew it was a risk-and, as he recalled, *risks are stupid* -but it was one she deserved. These past few months had been hard, and Eleven had rarely complained about her situation. She deserved some happiness.

But for God's sake, what was taking Wheeler so long?

Jim was just about to say "screw it" and drive El into town himself when he heard the clicking of a bicycle chain and the soft crunch of leaves outside. Peeking through the blinds, he said over his shoulder "He's here."

Immediately Eleven was up, making her way to the door, a smile on her face.

Mike had just leaned his bike against a tree on the other side of the tripwire when he heard the door to the cabin open. He looked up and felt the smile he already wore grow as El came down the steps, looking like a kid on Christmas.

Mike took a step over the wire, and within seconds the two teens were in each other's arms, locked in an embrace.

"Hi, El," he whispered into her hair.

"Mike," she muttered, clinging closer to him.

They pulled away, but stayed close. "I didn't know what you wanted to do," he began. "We could go to my house, maybe? Or to the arcade, or..."

"Well, think of something, and quick," Hopper's voice said as he came from the cabin.

Mike looked at El, wanting to know what she wanted. When she shrugged, he asked "How about my house? We can hang out in the basement, and invite the party over."

"Okay," Eleven said, nodding.

"What're the rules, kid?" Hopper asked as he walked down the stairs.

El rolled her eyes, but recited "Let you know where I am, have someone with me, don't go out at night."

"Look at you," Hopper said, impressed. To Mike, he said "I'm coming to get her when I get off work. I'll park a few houses down; it'll be about nine o'clock, okay?"

"Okay," Mike said with a nod. Taking Eleven's hand, he started to turn when Hopper began talking again.

"Your parents. They know about her?"

"I'm right here," El muttered.

Pausing, Mike answered with “Uh...no, not exactly, but...”

Hopper shook his head. “Don’t tell them yet. El, you stay in that basement, understand?”

“Understand,” she said softly.

Hopper nodded, letting out a breath as it hit him that Eleven would finally be spending time away outside of the cabin, *officially* . He knew Mike Wheeler would die before letting anything happen to her, but still...

“Come here,” he said, beckoning her over. She let go of Mike’s hand and walked over as Jim wrapped an arm around her, hugging her and kissing the top of her head. “You be careful now, hear me?” he said softly.

“Yes,” she said. “Not stupid.”

That got him to snort a laugh as he let her go. “No. You’re not. Now get on out of here, before I change my mind.”

Smiling, El let go of her adoptive father and met with Mike. Taking his hand, the two stepped over the tripwire and went to his bike.

“Here we go,” Hopper said to himself.

Mike let go of Eleven’s hand as he took his bike from it’s spot against the tree. As he turned towards El, he suddenly realized that it wasn’t 1983 anymore; the two had grown-Mike especially-since November of that year.

“Um...” he said, looking down at the bike.

Eleven frowned. “What’s wrong, Mike?”

“I just...I don’t know if we can both fit anymore.”

El looked at the bike as well, and she seemed to put two and two together. “Oh.”

An idea suddenly came to Mike. "You can ride on the bike pegs."

"Bike pegs?"

"Yeah," he said, pointing them out on the back of his bike. "You'd have to stand, and hold onto my shoulders." He looked up, and saw she still wore a frown. "We can walk," he offered. "It'd take longer, but..."

"No," Eleven said. "I can stand on the...bike pegs."

"You sure?"

"Yes," she said, nodding.

It took a few minutes for El to get comfortable, but once she was, Mike began to slowly ride them both back into Hawkins.

"You look pretty," Mike said over his shoulder when they'd emerged from the forest.

Eleven didn't respond right away, instead she smiled as the warm May wind blew on her face, causing her hair to blow up a bit. "Thank you," she said after a moment. "I missed you."

"I missed you, too." They rode quietly for a minute until Mike said "I didn't tell anyone else you were coming over yet. We can call them when we get to my house."

El nodded.

"So why did Hopper change his mind?"

"I don't know," she answered. "But I'm glad he did."

"Me too."

When they arrived on Maple Street, Mike took the bike to the back of his house, and he and Eleven entered the basement through the back door. Eleven smiled as they went inside, as she reminisced about that

week back in November, two years ago.

Mike picked up the walkie that'd been lying on the couch. Before he pressed the button to call his friends, though, he saw El smiling as she took in the small room. "Is something wrong?" he asked.

She shook her head. "I'm happy I'm home again."

Mike smiled. "Me too." Pressing the talk button, he called Lucas first, as he was the closest. "Hello, Lucas, you there? Over."

Static for a moment, until Lucas's voice responded with "Yeah. I'm here. Over."

"I need you to come over." Glancing at Eleven, he said "There's something you've gotta see. Over."

More static for a few seconds until Lucas came back on, saying "I just got back from Max's house, can it wait? I need to..."

"No, it can't wait," Mike interrupted. "It's big. I'm calling Dustin and Will, too. Be over at my house in fifteen minutes. Over and out."

Over the next five minutes he placed similar calls to Dustin and Will; Max didn't have a walkie and he was sure Lucas would call her and tell her. His calls finished, Mike put the walkie back on the couch, realizing he'd lost track of Eleven.

Behind him he heard a shuffling, and saw El inside the still-standing blanket fort, legs crossed as she looked up at him.

"They're coming," he said, sitting across from her.

Eleven nodded, and ran one of her hands alongside one of the sheets supporting the fort. "It's still here," she said.

"Yeah, of course," Mike responded. "I'd never take this down."

Smiling at him, El scooted over in an attempt to make room for him to sit next to her. Mike tried, but was once again reminded that it wasn't 1983 anymore, as their growth spurts kept them from sitting side by side in the fort. He began to go back to his spot across from

her, when Eleven used her mind to lift up an edge of the sheet, adjusting it and making it higher so Mike could sit next to her.

“Thanks,” he said, moving over. “Oh.” Seeing the spot of blood under her nose, he grabbed a tissue from a nearby box and handed it to her.

“Thank you,” she said, wiping the spot of red away.

Mike nodded his head. Chuckling, he said “My mom always wants to know why I put this up in the first place.”

“What do you tell her?”

“That I put it up when Will was gone, and it has a lot of memories.” He shrugged. “It’s not really lying.”

Eleven smiled, and lay her head on his shoulder. Their hands found each other’s, and she squeezed his. “I’m really happy Hopper let me come see you,” she told him.

“Me too,” he said, running his hand over her knuckle. “This is gonna be a great summer. I can’t wait to take you around town. There’s the mall, the movie theater, the pool. Plus, in a month, there’s the Fourth of July carnival.”

“Fourth of July?”

“It’s this holiday. It’s probably my second favorite, after Halloween. I can’t wait for you to see the fireworks, it’s awesome.”

Eleven didn’t say anything, though she didn’t really know what Mike was talking about (*Fourth of July? Fireworks?*). She knew she’d ask more about it later, but right now she honestly didn’t care too much about it; she was enjoying the fact that she got to be out of the cabin, sitting in her fort with her favorite person in the world. Things couldn’t get much better.

They sat a moment, until he sat up, remembering something. “What’s wrong?” El asked.

“There was something I wanted to give you,” he said. “I thought you might...”

There was a knock at the back door, and half a second later they heard Dustin's voice outside, calling "Mike, come on! Open up!"

Reluctantly, Mike climbed out of the fort and made his way to the door. Opening it, he was greeted by his three male friends as they pushed past him and into the basement.

"Okay, what's the big deal?" Lucas asked. "Why're you..." He paused—as did Dustin and Will—when they saw their friend Eleven sitting in the fort.

"Whoa," Dustin said.

Will looked worried. "Are you in trouble?"

"No," El said, standing up. "Hopper said it's safe."

The three boys all wrapped their friend in a hug, laughing in happiness that they were all together again.

"We've got to go out and do something," Lucas said when the group pulled apart.

"Yeah, like the pool or something," suggested Will.

"Or the movies!" Dustin chimed in.

"Guys, we can't," Mike said.

The boys looked to him and Eleven, confused looks on their faces. "Why not?" Lucas asked.

"There's...rules," El said, speaking up before Mike could.

"Rules? What rules?" asked Will.

So Eleven spent the next few minutes explaining Hopper's new rules to her friends. When she was finished, Dustin spoke, saying "Well that sucks."

El sighed.

"We can still have fun here," Mike said, trying to remain upbeat. "We

can play games, or watch a movie.”

“We always do that,” Lucas complained.

“Well, then, what do you want to do?”

“I don’t know,” Lucas admitted, shrugging.

He and Mike went back and forth for a minute, causing El to frown; she didn’t want to be the reason for their arguing. She finally spoke up, saying “We can go somewhere.”

That got the two boys to get quiet, with Mike, his face worried, turning to El and saying “No, El. We can stay here. I don’t...I don’t want you to get in trouble.”

But Eleven shook her head, saying “No trouble. Not stupid, Mike. We’ll be smart.”

“Alright!” Dustin said, grinning. “Well, let’s get going.”

“I should call Max,” Lucas said, heading towards the stairs. “Guys, where are we going to go?”

“We’re not going anywhere,” Mike said.

“What do you mean?”

“The rule was that El had to stay in one place, so we’re going to *stay* in one place. We’re staying here.”

Motioning towards El, Lucas stated “But El just said...”

“I don’t want to break Hopper’s rules,” Mike explained. Looking at Eleven, he said “It’s your first day out, El. I don’t want to give Hopper a reason to change his mind already.”

El nodded her head, understanding.

Lucas sighed, disappointed, but came back down the stairs. “Alright, then. What do *you* want to do?”

The group spent the next few hours just chatting in the basement; they talked about things they'd want to do over the summer, talked about the past few days, and ended their time together with a game of Uno. Eventually, however, it was time to call it a day-Will, Dustin, and Lucas had to get home for dinner, but not before talking about meeting at the mall the next day, if possible.

When Karen Wheeler called down to her son for dinner, he shouted back that he wasn't hungry, not wanting to leave El by herself.

"You have to eat, Mike," she told him, her head on his shoulder.

"I don't want to leave you alone," he said to her.

El smiled. "You're not. I'm right here."

Mike huffed, and reluctantly started to get up. "Do you want anything to eat?"

Eleven shook her head. "No."

"Okay. I'll eat fast." Bouncing off the couch, Mike made his way upstairs.

When the basement door closed, El got off the couch, and looked around the small room that had been her first home nearly two years ago. It wasn't as cluttered as it had been, but most of the things she remembered still remained; the poster with some monster on it, the figure that looked like some kind of animal, the toy Dustin had wanted her to make fly, the games. And, of course, the fort. It still made her happy that Mike had kept it up all of this time. She still remembered that night, stumbling in the rain, doing everything she could to get away from Papa and the bad men. She remembered the man who helped her, Benny; the sound of the gun...

She stopped herself, not allowing her mind to go down that alley. As horrific as that night had been, it had led her to her first real friends, and more importantly, to Mike. And after all of this time-that first year apart from each other, and the second year of infrequent visits-she finally got to see her friends again. Again, she was reminded of how happy she was that this wasn't a dream; it was, in fact, real life.

Climbing into the fort, she lay on her back as she awaited Mike to return.

Upstairs, Mike was scrambling to down his mom's meatloaf. Not that it wasn't delicious-his mom's food usually was-but he was almost afraid to leave Eleven alone in the basement for too long. A part of him was afraid he'd return to the basement and she'd be gone, and that it'd all been a dream. Still another part of him worried that El would make some kind of commotion downstairs, or would wander into the room like she'd almost done in 1983.

"Mike, you're going to choke," his mom told him.

"m' not," he mumbled, food spilling from his mouth.

"Gross," Nancy, next to him, muttered.

Forking the last bit of meat into his mouth, Mike swallowed and stood in one motion. "Thanks, mom!" he said before grabbing his plate and almost tripping over himself to get out of the room.

El's eyes opened as she heard a door open and footsteps come running down the stairs.

"Mike?" El asked.

"Oh. There you are," he said, seeing her crawling out of the fort. "I was worried."

She frowned. "About what?"

"That..." he was panting, trying to catch his breath. "That I'd dreamt you were here, that you weren't really here."

Standing, El stood across from him, and shook her head. "No. I'm here, Mike." She touched his freckled nose, causing him to smile. "I'm real."

He touched her nose back, causing El to laugh.

Holding hands, the two went and sat in the fort, El adjusting it once more to make room for Mike. The two lay side by side, El holding Mike's arm as she lay against him.

Yawning, she asked, Mike?"

"Yeah?"

"What are other summer things?"

"Hm?"

"Great summer," she said, recalling his earlier phrase.

"Oh. Well...there's the carnival. Barbecue, usually. Downtown there's usually a parade on the Fourth of July, and..."

"What's the Fourth of July? And fireworks?"

Mike stopped, sitting up and looking at her. "You don't know what July Fourth is?"

Her cheeks reddened in embarrassment as she shook her head. *This is something else*, she thought, *that's normal for everybody else and not me.*

"It's...it's awesome, El!" he told her. "It's this holiday where..." he went on, describing the festivities of the day. He knew it was important because it was a day to celebrate the independence from England or whatever, but all he really cared about telling her was the *fireworks*.

"Fire...works?" she asked, confused.

He nodded, excited. Halloween was his favorite holiday, but July 4th was a close second. "They're these like, rockets that you light up, and they go into the sky and go 'boom!'" he said, spreading his fingers in a makeshift explosion.

El looked confused, but could pick up on how excited he was about

them. “Oh.”

They spent the next hour talking about other summer things until finally, it was time for El to get ready to go home.

“I wanted to give you something,” Mike said as they began to go to the door. El paused, curious.

“Um...” Mike reached up onto a shelf and pulled down a toy she recognized.

Smiling, she said “Rory.”

“Yeah,” he said. “I, um...I was thinking maybe you could take him, and put him in your room, if you want. I could maybe get you some other things if you want, um...”

El took the toy he offered, and turned it in her hand. Finding the button on it’s stomach, she pushed it, causing a soft recorded roar. “Thank you,” she told Mike.

“You’re welcome.”

She smiled up at him, and then moved closer, tilting her head a tad as she brought her lips to his. Mike returned the kiss, holding one of El’s arms as she let out a sigh.

When they reluctantly broke the kiss, Mike sighed, knowing that Eleven had to go. As much as he wanted her to stay (and as much as he *definitely* wanted to continue what they were just doing), he didn’t want to be late by even a second to El’s pickup, or irritate Hopper.

“Come on,” he said. “It’s time.”

The two made their way outside and found Jim Hopper’s cruiser parked two houses down, after he flashed his lights twice to get their attention. El kissed Mike once more before she climbed into the car and she headed home.

On the ride, Eleven told him about the group’s planned trip to the

mall tomorrow (which Hopper said he'd have to think about). By the time they got back to the cabin, El was ready to crawl into bed. After a change of clothes, she put Rory on a shelf in her bedroom, smiling at the small toy before she went to go brush her teeth. However, before she put toothpaste on her toothbrush, she caught sight of herself in the mirror and paused.

Her nose was bleeding.

El frowned, confused. She hadn't used her powers in at least an hour; why would her nose be bleeding?

She grabbed a strip of tissue paper, and dabbed away the spot under her nose.

There was a sudden knock at the door, causing her to jump. "El?" came Hopper's voice. "You alright?"

"Yes," she said, balling up the tissue and throwing it in the trash.

"Well hurry up, I gotta get in there, too."

"Okay," she said. Glancing once more at herself in the mirror, she reached for the toothpaste.

Notes for the Chapter:

Originally I didn't want this chapter to be so fluffy, but it is what it is. The next two(?) chapters will be kind of the same, and it'll get "serious" later on. Thank you for reading and thanks to those that commented. Now that my workload has lightened up some I should be able to write more often.

3. The Nightmare

Notes for the Chapter:

This chapter was not meant to be this long, but once I got started I couldn't stop.

She awoke with a start, not knowing where she was. The room was dark, but something about it, even in the absence of light, felt familiar.

Knowing it was there she reached to her right and clicked on the bedside lamp, choking back a sob when she realized where she was:

Her first “home.” The lab.

How? She wondered. Where was Hopper? Mike?

And something smelled awful. The light next her only shone so far, and the smell didn't seem to be coming from anything in her line of vision.

“Hopper?” she whispered. When there was no response, she sat up on the bed. “Mike?” she asked, a little louder. Still no response.

Do not say his name , she thought to herself. *Do not call for Brenner* .

Slowly she moved to the edge of the bed, softly putting her feet to the ground. That's when she felt it.

Instead of hearing the soft smack of her feet tapping the tile floor, instead she was greeted with the sound of *splloosh* as she stepped into something wet. Looking down, she saw it.

There was blood; lots of it.

It pooled around Eleven's ankles, and the stickiness she felt on the soles of her feet made her stomach turn.

She was back in the lab, in the old room she used to think of as her bedroom. How she'd got here, she didn't know. But something had

woken her up.

Was it Papa? The Monster?

Where had the blood come from? It appeared to be everywhere-the tiled walls were now a combination of light red and dark pink, as the lamp seemed to shine brighter.

Hopper? Mike?

“Hello?” she called quietly, taking a step. Again she gagged as her feet moved in the blood, the smell and sound making her gag. Still no answer.

She made it to the door and hesitated, terrified of what would be on the other side. “Mike?” she asked quietly, hoping perhaps he was waiting for her on the other side.

Pressing her ear to the door she listened; for voices, for gunshots, for footsteps, *anything* ; there was nothing but dead silence.

Taking a deep breath she pried open the door, expecting the worst.

There were bodies, dead bodies on the floor. *Did I do this?* She wondered. “Mike?” she asked, a little louder. “Hopper?” she asked even louder, nearly a scream.

She suddenly heard a noise behind her.

Whipping around, she turned. Behind her was a corner. She could *hear* something-almost like a clicking noise. She saw the shadow of something, the shadow getting bigger as it came towards the corner, the clicking beginning to turn into a roar as whatever it was began screaming; that’s when El realized that she, too, was screaming.

However, before she saw what it was, she woke up. It took her a moment to get her bearings, but she began to calm down as she took in her belongings: she was in the cabin. *Her* cabin. *Hopper’s* cabin. There was her teddy bear, next to her. Her dresser. And there was Rory where she’d put him last night, atop a shelf, looking down at

her.

“Dream,” she said to herself as her heart raced. Then, remembering a word she’d heard Hopper use, said “Nightmare.”

Pulling off the covers, she got out of bed, feeling relief as her feet touched the familiar floor of the cabin instead of the icky blood from her thoughts. It was morning, she could tell from the light shining through the windows and the sounds of Hopper moving around in the kitchen, no doubt getting breakfast ready. She made her way to the door, but just before turning the knob, she paused.

She felt blood on her lip.

Wiping at her nose, there it was again: blood.

She turned back and looked at her room, thinking maybe she had accidentally used her powers last night-but nothing looked disturbed, everything was in it’s normal place. She wiped at her nose once more, not wanting Hopper to know, then opened her bedroom door.

“Hey, just in time,” Hopper said when he saw her. He was scooping eggs onto two plates. “Grab some silverware, wouldja?”

El nodded, padding over to the drawer where they kept forks and spoons, grabbing one of each before she returned to the table. Sitting across from Hopper, she saw that with the eggs were her favorites, Eggo waffles.

“Everything okay?” he asked, shooting a cautious glance at her.

“Yes,” she answered quietly, picking up the syrup.

Hopper looked at her once more, worried, but decided not to push the topic.

They both began to eat their meal, quiet at first, until Eleven had a question to ask.

“The mall?”

“Hm?” he asked, pushing food around on his plate.

"Mike...my friends are going to the mall today. Can I go? You said you had to think about it."

"Hm," he repeated, nodding his head. The whole time his eyes were on his plate as he moved food around, a nervous habit El recognized. Finally looking up, Hopper said "Yeah, El; you can go."

She smiled, but the ease of which he answered had her concerned. Her smile fading, she asked "What's wrong?"

"Wrong? Nothing," he answered, wiping at his mouth.

"Friends don't..."

"Yeah, kid, I know," he said, letting out a sigh. Leaning on the table, he said "But there was something that I wanted to talk to you about."

"Oh. Okay."

"How would you feel about moving into town?"

"Moving?"

"Yeah."

She looked around her at her surroundings: the couch where she'd watch her soap operas, the windows Hopper had had to replace after her tantrum a few months ago; their little bathroom nook. It was small, yes, but it was her home.

"No more cabin?" she asked.

"That's right," Hopper responded, nodding. "I mean...it'd still be ours, technically. I still own it. But I just thought....with it being safe now, maybe we could think about relocating back into Hawkins."

"Relocating?"

"Means moving," he clarified. Leaning back in his chair, he asked, "What do you think?"

To be honest, El didn't know what to think. She had grown to love

the cabin, with its wooden walls and creaking floorboards. The way it would sway on really windy days, and how she knew every single inch of the small home. She still remembered how happy she'd felt when she saw her bedroom for the first time, and how surprisingly happy she had been to return here after the ordeal with the Mind Flayer.

Still, it would be nice to be in Hawkins. It would save her time when she went to see her friends, for one. As much as she had come to love it here, the isolation sometimes got to her. The fact that if she wanted to go outside, there wasn't really anything for her to actually *do*.

"I don't know," she finally answered. "I will think about it."

Hopper nodded, gathering his plate and silverware in the process. "Okay. When's Mike coming over?"

She shrugged. "I have to call."

"Get to it, then."

She wasn't sure what that meant, but after El finished eating she cleaned up her plates and called Mike, inquiring what time the group would meet. He told her he'd pick her up at noon, and the two would then head to the mall for the day. If time, he told her, they could go back to the cabin.

When she finished her conversation with Mike, she turned to see Hopper standing in the doorway, arms folded.

"I've got to go to work," he told her. "Mike's on his way?"

"Yes."

Hopper nodded, then stepped into the room. Sitting in the chair near her bed, he said "El, listen. I know you're excited about going out and everything, but you still need to *be careful*, alright? Keep an eye out for anything suspicious, alright?"

El frowned. "Sus...pish...us?"

"Anything that's weird, wrong, or shouldn't be there." Sitting up, he

asked, "What are the rules?"

Nearly rolling her eyes, Eleven recited with "Keep someone with me, don't go out at night, and you need to know where I am."

Hopper grinned, standing up. "You're smart, kid; I ever tell you that?"

"Not stupid," she reminded him.

He nodded at the door. "See you soon, kid."

While she waited, Eleven got dressed. Although she'd mostly gotten over wondering if others found her pretty, she was starting to want new clothes. The ones she wore were mostly things Hopper found, but they were too...boyish. She wanted something new to wear, something more. She wondered if there would be clothing stores at the mall?

After changing, she tried using her powers, making sure the phantom nosebleeds didn't have anything to do with her abilities maybe disappearing. Thankfully that wasn't the case, as she was able to lift and lower her teddy bear just fine. She wiped the blood from her nose just as she heard Mike arriving, the telltale sounds of crunching leaves giving him away.

She opened the door with her mind, revealing a somewhat surprised Mike on the other side. His eyes met hers and he smiled. "I sometimes forget," he commented, stepping inside, "About your powers."

With the nightmare this morning and the concerns about her powers, El was more than happy to see Mike again. She rushed to him, wrapping her arms around him, hugging him close.

Mike, somewhat taken aback, returned the embrace, rubbing her back in the process. "Is everything okay, El?"

"Yes," she responded softly into his polo shirt. "Happy you're here."

“Me too,” he admitted before she pulled away. The two shared a brief kiss before Mike took El’s hand. “You ready?”

She nodded, and the two left the cabin, Eleven shutting the door behind them with her mind.

“What’s at the mall?” she asked, standing on the back of his bike as they rode into town.

“It’s just a bunch of stores,” he told her.

Eleven frowned, realizing something. “Money?”

“What?”

“I don’t have money.”

“Oh. That’s okay. I have some, and I’m sure everybody else will pitch in.”

El smiled, thankful that she had such nice friends. “Thank you,” she said, stooping over a bit and saying it into his ear.

Mike felt himself blush at the close contact. “You’re welcome,” he said back to her.

El leaned back, keeping her hands on Mike’s shoulders as she sat up. “What stores?” she asked.

“Um, well, there’s The Gap, and an Orange Julius, I think.”

Mike went on to name a few more places, some that El had heard of on TV, while most of them sounded new to her.

Finally, Mike said “There’s Scoops Ahoy, an ice cream place where Steve works. Dustin wants to go there, first.”

“Scoops Ahoy?”

“It’s an ice cream place.”

El nodded. "I like ice cream."

Mike returned the nod. "Everybody likes ice cream."

At the mall, Steve was, at the moment, *not* liking ice cream. It was the second day of Starcourt Mall being open for business, and if the last two days were any indication, they might run out of ice cream before the end of the first week.

Luckily there were enough people working at the moment; yesterday the line had been twice as long as his manager, Barry, had anticipated. Thankfully he'd scheduled more people as a result.

There were currently two lines; Steve manned one register while his coworker, Robin, worked another. Behind them, three others-James, Amanda, and Glenn-were working like crazy to prepare the ice cream, and restocking the toppings when they started to get low.

"Okay," Steve said to his current customer, "That's two U.S.S. Butterscotches and one Feeling Blue Moon with sprinkles?"

The customer nodded, handing Steve a twenty dollar bill, with Steve giving him change. "Next!" He called.

"You're supposed to say 'ahoy'," Robin whispered next to him.

Ignoring her, Steve took the next customer's order of Cup of Jamocha.

Fifteen minutes later Steve was on a break, and he found a seat in the mall's breakroom. Taking the neckerchief from around his neck he let out a sigh.

A moment later the break room door opened, and he opened his eyes as Robin walked in.

"They let you go, too?" he asked. "Who's running the registers?"

"Matt and Dave came in," she said, sitting across from him. She fidgeted with one of the bracelets on her wrist. "I swear, the first

thing I'm doing when I go home today is washing the smell of ice cream off me. I didn't even know ice cream *had* a smell until I worked here."

Steve grinned, nodding his head.

"So what's your story, Harrington?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, why are you here?"

He shrugged. "I needed a job, and this was the easiest one I could find. Why?"

"Just curious," she said, standing and going to the vending machine. "You from around here?"

"Yeah," he answered, wondering why she was asking so many questions. "What about you?"

Putting coins into the machine, she looked over her shoulder at him. "What about me?"

"What's your story?"

She breathed a laugh as a can of Coke fell down. Picking it up, she responded with "I'm from the city. Indianapolis."

"And why are *you* here?"

"I needed a job, too."

"Yeah, but...why Hawkins? Why Starcourt Mall? Why Scoops Ahoy?"

"Weather, boys, money," she said, ticking them off on her fingers.

"Weather? What weather? The city's weather is just like ours."

She shrugged, opening the can of Coke. "Well, then, I like small towns."

Steve chuckled. "Well, you could've done a helluva lot better than

Hawkins.”

Robin smiled as the break room door opened, and two workers from RadioShack came in. Steve picked up his neckerchief, about to say something to Robin, but when he looked up, she was gone.

Outside of the mall, the group of Dustin, Lucas, and Max were near the doors, waiting for their absent friends.

“He said twelve-thirty, right?” Max asked Lucas. She was referring to Mike.

“That’s what he said,” Lucas answered, adjusting the hat he wore. He and Dustin sat side by side on a bench, while Max stood, arms crossed, ready to go in.

“How far is the cabin from here?” Dustin asked.

“I don’t know,” Lucas answered. “I haven’t had to pick El up before.”

Dustin grinned. “What if they’re out somewhere sucking face?”

“Ew, Dustin,” Max said. Looking towards the parking lot, she said “There they are.”

The boys turned and, sure enough, saw Mike’s bike heading their way, with El holding his shoulders as she stood on the pegs of the back wheel.

“Took you long enough!” Lucas said, standing.

“We’re only a few minutes late,” Mike said as he maneuvered his bike to a nearby bike rack. Still holding his shoulders, El jumped off. She immediately made her way over to Max, hugging her friend.

“Sorry I couldn’t see you yesterday,” Max told El.

But Eleven shook her head. “You’re here now. How are you?”

The two girls talked for a few minutes, with Mike walking over to

Lucas and Dustin. “Where’s Will?” he asked.

“He’s on his way,” Dustin explained.

“And you were complaining about me?”

“He wasn’t out picking up his girlfriend,” Lucas said. “And besides, look.” The boys turned, and saw Jonathan Byers’ car coming down the parking lot. Jonathan parked, and the two Byers boys talked for a minute before Will nodded, and got out of the car.

“Finally,” Dustin said.

“Sorry,” Will apologized. “I had to wait for Jonathan to get off of work.” Behind him, Jonathan’s car pulled away.

The six kids met in a circle. “So, everyone’s ready?” Dustin asked.

“Yes, Dustin,” Lucas said. “Now let’s go get some ice cream.”

The group turned to go in. Eleven and Mike, bringing up the rear, held hands as the group entered the mall.

Right away, El was amazed at how *big* it all was. The mall seemed to stretch on forever, and it was teeming with people; kids, adults, infants. Eleven never thought she’d seen this many people gathered all at once before. And the stores! Mike had told her the mall was basically just a bunch of stores in one place, but she hadn’t expected to see this many. There were names she recognized-RadioShack, Zales, and Waldenbooks; as well as places she didn’t-Jazzercise, Claire’s, and Kaufman Shoes. She was beginning to feel overwhelmed.

Noticing, Mike squeezed her hand. “You okay?” he asked.

She nodded, eyes still looking around. “It’s a lot,” she said.

“Yeah, I know.”

In front of them, Dustin said “This is so cool. Come on, let’s go get some ice cream.”

They made their way to the food court, but paused when they

arrived, shocked by the long lines that greeted them.

“Are you serious?” Dustin asked.

“It’s the second day, what’d you expect?” Mike asked.

“Oh my gosh, it’s probably going to be like this *everywhere*,” Max moaned.

“Let’s just get in line, guys,” Will suggested. “The Scoops Ahoy line is moving, at least.”

Despite some grumbling, the six of them got in line. Thankfully Will was right, and less than 10 minutes later they’d reached the front.

Steve saw them, and smiled when he saw who was here. “Dustin!” he called.

Smiling, Dustin greeted him as the older boy reached across the counter, high fiving his friend. “How’s it going?” Dustin asked him.

Steve shook his head. “These lines, man. They never end.” Nodding at the rest of the kids, Steve asked “What brings you guys out here?”

“Um...we want ice cream,” Lucas answered.

“When do you get off?” Dustin asked Steve.

Steve shook his head. “Not for another couple of hours. But walk around, the place isn’t half-bad.” Steve, seeing Robin eyeballing him for holding up the line, cleared his throat and asked “So what do you guys want?”

“Uhhh,” Dustin said, looking at the menu above Steve’s head. “I’ll have the Caramel Apple Anchors Away.”

Steve nodded. “Good choice. You know, there’s little graham cracker pieces that’re shaped like anchors in it?”

“Cool,” Dustin responded.

Lucas ordered the Mayday Sorbet for himself, with Max getting the

Navy Blueberry Surprise. Will ordered the Sailor's Delight cone, with Eleven getting an SO-Strawberry on a waffle cone and Mike getting a cup of Chocolate Ships Ahoy.

"Come back tomorrow," Steve suggested after ringing them up. "Hopefully it'll be a lot less crowded."

"Not likely," Robin muttered under her breath.

The young teens said goodbye, then sat at one of the few remaining tables in the food court.

"So, where to next?" Mike asked.

"I want to look at clothes," Max suggested.

The boys rolled their eyes, while El smiled enthusiastically.

"Can't we just walk around and see what's here?" Lucas asked.

"You guys can do that," Max said. "El and I can go shopping."

Mike looked to the girl next to him. "Is that what you want, El?"

Eleven nodded, before looking to Max. "I need new clothes," she said.

Max smiled. "Oh, we can *definitely* do that."

After finishing their ice cream, the group talked more about their next steps. Max wanted she and El to start at one of the department stores, while Dustin and Lucas argued about where the boys would begin.

Mike pulled El aside. Digging into his pockets, he pulled out a few bills and gave them to El. "For your clothes," he told her.

She looked confused. "You're not coming?"

He grinned as he shook his head. "No. I don't really want clothes. Are you going to be okay with Max?"

El glanced over at her female friend, who was trying to settle Lucas and Dustin's debate. "Yes," El answered.

"Just...make sure you stay with her, alright?"

Eleven frowned, slightly. "I'm not stupid, Mike."

Mike's eyes widened. "I know! I know, I was just...."

"All done, lover boy?" Max asked, coming over and taking El's arm. Mike started to say something, but Max was already talking to his girlfriend about all the places they'd go. The two girls walked off, with El glancing over her shoulder and giving a small wave goodbye to Mike.

The boys began their journey, taking in the sights, sounds, and stores that Starcourt had to offer.

"I didn't know they had a movie theater!"

"There's an arcade here?"

"I need to go to Waldenbooks, I told Jonathan I'd get him this book he wanted."

His friends talked, but Mike was only partly listening. He was a little concerned about Eleven, and whether or not her going off with Max violated one of Hopper's rules. Technically they *were* all in the same place, but if Hopper were to come barging through the door, saying he needed El right now, she wouldn't be here. Should he have gone with her?"

"Earth to Mike," Lucas said, hitting his shoulder.

"Huh? What? I'm listening," Mike said.

"Bull," Dustin replied.

"Then what did we say?" Lucas asked, crossing his arms.

"You were saying how we should go see what arcade games they have."

"Damn," Lucas muttered, letting Mike know he was correct. "Come on." The group continued, with Lucas eventually asking "What's with you, anyway?"

"Nothing's 'with me'."

"El's fine, Mike," Dustin said.

"I know."

"Then start enjoying yourself," Dustin shot back. "It's the *mall*, man."

Mike agreed, and for the next two hours, he got out of his own head and just enjoyed his surroundings. The boys visited the stores they wanted to, and after some time ended sitting outside of the department store the girls had said they'd be at.

Dustin stood, looking in the window of the nearby Sam Goody store while Lucas, Mike, and Will sat on a bench, awaiting the girls.

"It's been like two hours," Mike said, glancing down at his watch. "How much shopping can they do?"

"They're probably just paying," Lucas said. "They know we're out here waiting."

A minute later Dustin came back over, and nodded towards the department store. "Isn't that them?"

Mike looked, but shook his head. It was Max, but the girl with hers' hair looked different than Eleven's. While El had recently began straightening her hair, this girl had somewhat curly hair, and different clothes.

"That's not them," Mike said, slightly worried. "I mean, that's Max, but that's not El." *Did she leave El behind? Is El on her way out?* He wondered.

"Dude," Will said, hitting Mike's knee. " *That's El*."

Mike did a double take as the two girls got closer; and sure enough, upon closer inspection, it *was* Eleven. She had a worried and shy look on her face as Mike stood up, mouth open as he thought of what to say. “What...you...it...” he stammered as the girls stood in front of them.

“What do you think, Wheeler?” Max asked.

Honestly, Mike didn’t know *what* to think. It was El, alright, but she looked.... *not* like El. She was still beautiful, of course, but she now looked like any other girl he would see at the mall or at school. But still his El.

“Mike?” she asked, a hint of worry in her voice, no doubt because he hadn’t spoken yet. “Still pretty?”

Snapping out of it, Mike nodded, taking her hand. “Beautiful.”

She ducked her head, shy, as they turned back to their friends.

The group continued, debating where to go to next. “*Fletch* is playing at the theater,” Will suggested.

“No, let’s go and see Steve again,” Dustin said.

Lucas, holding Max’s hand, said “And wait in line for another twenty minutes? Uh, no.”

“It was *barely* ten minutes,” Dustin said.

“You guys...” Max said.

“Anywhere you want to go, El?” Mike quietly asked her.

She shrugged. She was curious what time it was, and if she needed to be leaving soon. She started to ask Mike, but when she turned to him he was looking at her face, worried. “What?” she asked.

“Your nose is bleeding,” he said. Using his sleeve, he wiped at her nose. Quietly, he asked “Were you using your powers?”

She shook her head, saying “I...” But she stopped when there was a commotion in front of them.

There was a man and woman walking, and the woman had accidentally dropped the drink she carried. The fruit punch in her cup spilled onto the floor, and suddenly Eleven had a replay of this morning’s nightmare, with the punch thickening into blood before her. She began taking quick breaths as she slowly backpedaled.

“El?” Mike asked quietly. “You okay?”

Their friends turned around, frowning when they saw Eleven looking scared. “What’s wrong?” Will asked.

Eleven didn’t answer; she knew she was here, in the mall and not the lab. But she was imagining the bodies she’d seen in the hallway, and that clicking sound from her nightmare.

“El?” Max asked, letting go of Lucas’s hand and walking over. “El? It’s okay.”

Mike put his hand on her shoulder. “El? You’re safe. It’s alright.”

Suddenly, things began to come back into focus; the blood began to soften into punch, the clicking sounds turned back into the sounds of passing people, and the bodies morphed to her present company, their worried faces looking her over.

Tears were beginning to form in her eyes, both at the fear she felt and the embarrassment as people passing by looked at her. “Mike?”

“I’m here,” he said to her. “Sit down.” He led her to a nearby bench, their friends right behind them.

“I’ll go get a water,” Dustin said, rushing off.

“What happened?” Will asked, kneeling in front of her.

She didn’t answer, but instead covered her face, resting her head on Mike’s shoulder.

“Do you want to go home?” Mike whispered into her ear.

She nodded, still shielding her face from her friends.

"I'm going to take her home," Mike told the group.

"But we still have, like, half the mall to see," Lucas said.

Mike shook his head. "I'll talk to you later," he told them. "We're going back to the cabin."

The ride from the mall was mostly quiet, with Eleven sniffing as she wiped at her eyes from time to time. Mike offered the occasional word of consolation; *It's okay* or *We're almost there* .

When they finally arrived at the cabin, the sun was starting to lower in the sky. Mike pulled his bike next to the tree where he usually parked, and then the two of them got off. Mike walked El to the cabin door.

"You okay?" he asked her.

She nodded as she opened the door. "Thanks."

"Right," Mike said, nodding. "Well...I'll let you know about tomorrow, and..."

"Come in?" she asked, extending her hand.

"Yeah, okay," he said, nodding his head. Taking her hand, he followed her into the cabin. They hadn't seen Hopper's cruiser, so they knew the chief wasn't home yet. With Eleven leading, the two made their way into her bedroom, where they sat side by side on the bed.

"Do you want water or something?" Mike asked. She shook her head, her new curls bouncing slightly as she did so.

"I'm sorry if I hurt your feelings," Mike said, his hands fidgeting.

El finally looked up, confused. "Hurt my feelings?"

“When I told you to stay with Max. I was just...I was afraid we were breaking one of Hopper’s rules, you know? We weren’t staying together. And I was worried something bad might happen, and I didn’t want...I’m sorry, El. You’re not stupid. You’re really smart.”

That brought a small smile to her face. “Thank you,” she said before leaning over and kissing his cheek. He blushed, rubbing the spot on his face. “It didn’t hurt my feelings,” she explained. “But thank you.”

They sat quietly for a minute, before Eleven remembered something. “We might be moving.”

Mike looked up. “You what?”

“This morning. Hopper...he told me he’s thinking about moving. Into Hawkins.”

“That’s great, El!” Mike said. “We could see each other more often.” Eleven smiled, and looked around her room. Catching a look on her face, Mike asked “What’s wrong?”

She shrugged. “I...kind of like it here.”

“You do?”

She nodded. “It’s...” She paused, thinking of the word. “Com...” She looked to Mike for help.

“Comfortable?”

El nodded. “Yes.”

“Oh. Well, I could see that. It’s nice and quiet out here. And it’s cozy, I guess.”

“It’s home,” she said quietly.

Mike nodded. After a moment, he asked “El? Can you tell me what happened at the mall?”

She let out a breath before she finally looked at him again. “I had a...bad dream this morning.”

“A bad dream? About what?”

“I was back... *there* ,” she said, nodding outside. When Mike looked confused, she said “Lab. And people were dead, and there was a lot of blood. And...”

“And what, El?”

“Monster.”

“There was a monster? Was it the Demogorgon?”

She shook her head again. “Don’t know. I...couldn’t see it. But it made a different sound.”

Mike tilted his head. “What did it sound like?”

“Cl...clicks,” she said, after thinking about the word.

Mike nodded, before he asked “Did you tell Hopper?”

“No.” Straightening up, she said “It was just a dream.”

“But it was the monster, El. Maybe it’s something like Will, last year, and...”

She put her hand on his, silencing him. “ *Mike* ,” she said. “Just a dream.”

Mike sighed, nodding, but not really ready to count this off as a dream. “What about your nosebleed at the mall? *Were* you using your powers?”

“No,” she answered. Eleven then spent a few minutes explaining the mysterious nosebleeds she’d gotten over the past day.

When she finished, Mike shook his head. “We’ve got to tell Hopper.”

“No.”

“Why not?”

“Not yet,” she clarified. “I don’t want him to worry.”

He grinned. "Yeah, but El, now *I'm* gonna worry."

"Don't," she told him. "I'll be okay."

"You promise?"

Eleven nodded. "Promise."

Mike sighed. Things got quiet for a moment, until Mike reached over and brushed a loose curl from her face. "I like your hair, by the way. And your new clothes."

She smiled. "Thanks. I like you."

Mike smiled, and leaned in, bringing his lips to hers. El smiled into it, returning the kiss as her arms rested on his shoulders, brining Mike closer and deepening the kiss.

That's when they heard the front door open.

With a soft *smack* their lips came apart, and Eleven nodded her head at the bedroom door, closing it.

"El?" they heard Hopper's voice call as his footsteps followed. "I know you're in there with Mike, kid, open up."

A moment later the door opened and Hopper paused, seeing the two teens sitting on the bed; El resting against the headboard, her teddy bear in her lap. Mike sat at the foot of the bed, a magazine in his hands.

Hopper looked skeptical, knowing something else had been more than likely been going on.

"Hi," Eleven said, acting innocent. "You're early."

"Uh-huh. Hey, Mike," Hopper said.

"Hi chief."

Glancing at El, Hopper said "I like your new clothes." Turning back around, he said "They're bitchin."

Mike raised a confused eyebrow and looked at El. “What?” he whispered.

Eleven choked back a giggle, before reaching for a book of her own.

Notes for the Chapter:

I am trying like **crazy** to get this done before the third season premieres. I'm attempting to update this at least twice a week, but we shall see. My goal is to have the next chapter by mid-week. The next chapter will jump ahead a few weeks.

A few scenes from this chapter were my version of some of the stills that've been released-Mike and El on her bed reading, the boys seemingly waiting at the mall, Eleven's makeover, and she and Max entering the mall from the trailer. Less than a month away, people.

As always, thanks for reading.

4. M + E

Notes for the Chapter:

Fluff warning!
...and something not so fluffy.

June 19, 1985

“Why’re we even doing this, chief?” Powell asked.

Chief Jim Hopper shook his head. Truth be told, even he didn’t know why they were out here. Flo’d received a call from Eugene an hour ago about a dead animal in his field. Usually Jim would send any officer out to check on it; even Powell or Callahan if he were in a pinch. But with the whole secret-netherworld-vines-and-tunnels he’d discovered out here last year, Jim felt he should check things himself. Which is why he and two of his deputies were now driving out to the farm on the edge of town.

Of course, he couldn’t tell them that.

“It’s the Hawkins Police Department’s duty to investigate all crimes, be it major or minor,” Hopper said, reciting the department’s handbook.

“Chief, we don’t even know if this is a crime,” Callahan, in the back seat, said.

“No, and that’s why we’re here,” Hopper said as he turned onto Eugene’s farm.

He parked the cruiser, and the three of them climbed out. Eugene was standing at the foot of his porch, hands on his hips.

“How you doing, Eugene?” Hopper called, adjusting his sunglasses.

“I called you guys more than an hour ago,” Eugene responded. “What took you?”

“Crime never sleeps, isn’t that what they say?” Hopper asked.

"It's the middle of the damn day; ain't nobody sleeping."

Behind Hopper, Powell chuckled. "Yeah," Hopper responded. "So why don't you show us what's going on?"

Eugene led the way into his field, explaining what he'd come across. "I was out this morning, checking up on things, you know? My corn's supposed to be sprouting soon."

"You grow corn out here? I thought you only grew pumpkins," Callahan said.

"It's the end of June, nobody's buying pumpkins now," Eugene answered. Then to Hopper, he said "Anyway I was out just over yonder," he said, stopping and pointing a little ways ahead. "That's when I saw it."

Hopper stopped, too, and squinted in the direction Eugene pointed. "Saw what?"

"You'll see," he answered, and put his hands in his pockets.

"What, you're not gonna show us?" Jim asked.

Eugene shook his head. "Nope. Once is enough."

The three officers exchanged looks. Finally, Hopper sighed and took off his sunglasses. "Alright."

"I'll, uh...stay back here," Callahan said.

"What, you scared or something?" Powell asked as he followed the chief.

"No," Callahan answered. "But I figure someone should stay back, you know, in case..."

"Stay here," Hopper told him. He and Powell made their way into the field. They were about fifteen feet away from Callahan and Eugene when they heard it: the droning sound of a group of flies.

"Ugh," Powell said, covering up his nose.

Hopper smelled it, too, and brought a hand to his face as well. Finally,

they saw what had drawn the flies: the rotted corpse of a dog.

“Poor thing,” Powell said, as the chief knelt down to get a better look. He swatted away the flies, and that’s when he saw what could’ve possibly spooked Eugene. The dog was dead, of course, but it was how it had died that was off putting. There were dozens of small bite marks all over the canine’s body, almost as if it had been attacked by a swarm of small animals. He couldn’t tell.

“What do you think happened here?” Powell asked.

Jim shook his head. “I don’t know.”

“Gotta be an animal or something, right, chief?”

“Or something,” Hopper responded, standing up. He began the walk back to Callahan and Eugene, and Powell was more than happy to follow.

“So?” Eugene asked as they got closer.

“So, what?” Jim asked. “Something attacked your dog.”

“Come on, chief! You know that ain’t normal.”

“What did it look like?” Callahan asked.

“Why don’t you go over there and see?” Powell retorted.

“That ain’t my dog,” Eugene told Jim. “What am I supposed to do with it?”

“I don’t know, bury it?” Hopper asked, putting his sunglasses back on. The farmer gave him a look, causing Hopper to concede. “Fine. I’ll call animal control, and get them out here. Okay?”

Eugene seemed happy with that, nodding his head.

“So was it, like, cut in half or something?” Callahan asked as the men made their way back to the house. When the others gave him a look, he shrugged, adding “It could’ve been a bear or something, we don’t know.”

Powell tsked, shaking his head while Eugene glared at him.

Hopper was ignoring the conversation, thinking about what he'd just seen. A part of him chalked it off to just some animal attacking the dog, but a part of him-the part of him that'd lived in Hawkins over the last two years-thought maybe something else was going on.

The month of June went by quickly. The kids spent their time having fun; there were further explorations of the mall, two trips to the pool, and plenty of hanging out, just enjoying each other's company.

Soon after Eleven's incident at the mall, Hopper found a modest ranch home for he and El to move into. She still wasn't sure about leaving the cabin, and in an attempt to perhaps change her mind, Hopper took her on a visit to their possible new home. El liked it; it was bigger than the cabin, she'd give it that. It wasn't as far from her friends as the cabin was. But she had gotten so used to the cabin with its familiar creaks and groans and this house, though nice, didn't have any of the character that the cabin did, and she wondered if she'd ever grow to love it like she did their place in the woods. She was happy to see that Hopper would have his own room now, instead of having to sleep in the same room as the television. They still shared a bathroom, something El wasn't too fond of, but Hopper told her she'd get over. After a few more days of thinking about it, she eventually told Hopper that yes, she wouldn't mind moving.

They wouldn't be moving until the middle of July, but in the meantime The Party helped her get ready for her new room: Max found string lights that the girls would hang in her new room. Will worked on some new sketches that Eleven would decorate her room with. Lucas got her a little radio to listen to music on, and Dustin got her a small plant.

Mike's time at the cabin increased, as he would come and help El pack up. When they weren't packing, they would sit either on her bed or the couch and talk, just enjoying being together. Mike brought over a poster from his basement for Eleven to hang in her new room, but she'd put it up the day he brought it over, saying she liked looking at it *now*. By the end of June, the poster and Rory still hadn't been packed yet.

El's nosebleeds didn't stop, but the frequency of which they happened decreased. Despite Mike's suggestions, she still wasn't ready to tell Hopper just yet.

Thankfully she didn't have anymore nightmares, and she checked off the "blood one" as a fluke. As July approached, all everyone could think of was the upcoming Fourth of July Carnival.

On the morning of July Fourth Eleven awoke with a smile, knowing what the day would bring: first, breakfast with Hopper. Then Max was going to come and pick her up, and the two girls would go to the mall for a bit. They'd then meet up with the boys at the carnival, where they'd be until Hopper arrived to pick her up.

She opened her bedroom door and walked to the kitchen, where Hopper already sat at the table, newspaper in one hand and a spoon in the other. In front of him sat a bowl of cereal that looked mostly untouched.

"Good morning," Eleven said, getting a bowl for herself as she took a seat across from him.

"Hey, kid," he responded, sliding the milk over to her. "How'd you sleep?"

"Good," she said, looking around. Seeing her cereal box sitting on the counter, she summoned it over with her mind. Once she got it, she wiped away the spot of blood that resulted in it.

"What time are you heading to the carnival?" he asked.

El thought about it. "Five zero zero."

"Five o'clock, kid; five o'clock. Gotta get better with that."

"I know," she said as she began pouring cereal into her bowl. Looking up, she asked "You will be there?"

"Yep," he answered, nodding. "I'll get there sometime after you, but yeah, I'll be there." Looking up, he asked "Do you remember what

time you're meeting me?"

El took a second, then slowly answered "Nine oh clock," making sure she got each word correct.

Hopper nodded. "Right. By the entrance." Folding the newspaper, he asked "You looking forward to the rides?"

"Yes," she answered, stirring around her cereal.

"Yeah? I bet Mike is, too."

Mike, meanwhile, was in his basement, sitting in the fort. His Supercomm sat next to him, in case one of his friends should call. He was trying not to call El, as he knew she'd be spending time with Max today. Since Eleven's return, Mike had grown very protective, always wanting to know she was okay. Then when the nosebleeds started, his protectiveness had gone into overdrive. He had wanted to spend time with her today, but Nancy pointed out that El needed time with other girls instead of being around boys all the time. Besides, he'd be seeing El at the carnival tonight, and hopefully get to spend some time alone with her. Mike was really hoping they'd go on the ferris wheel and sit together.

Another thing he was thinking about was his parents. *How would he introduce Eleven to them?* With she and Hopper moving into town soon, El was sure to be over here more often, and was bound to run into his parents at some point. He knew he needed to talk to Hopper about it, but wasn't sure how the chief would respond.

His walkie suddenly came to life, and snapped him out of his daydream. As he picked it up, he heard Dustin's voice asking "Mike, do you copy? Over."

"Yeah," Mike answered, clicking the button to talk. "I copy. Are you guys ready? Over." The four boys were going to see *Back to the Future*.

"Um, yeah," Dustin began, "Except there's been a change of plans. Over."

“What do you mean?” After a moment, Mike added “Over.”

“We’re going to see it at The Hawk, not at Starcourt. Over.”

“What? Why?” Again, after a pause, asked “Over.”

“The Hawk doesn’t have Red Vines, and Lucas wants Red Vines. Over.”

“Oh my gosh,” Mike mumbled under his breath. “What time? Over.”

“Twenty minutes. Over.”

Twenty minutes? Mike stood up. “Fine. I’ll see you guys there. Over and out.” He tossed his walkie down and scrambled upstairs, rushing to get his bike.

A little bit later at Starcourt, Steve found himself enjoying a brief slow moment in the day. He’d lucked out and received an early shift. He didn’t exactly have any plans for today, but it *was* the Fourth of July, and he’d rather be off then here tonight.

Next to him, his coworker Robin was staring out at the food court, absentmindedly playing with the bracelets that adorned her wrist.

“Something wrong?” Steve asked her.

“No,” she answered. “Just bored.”

“Oh. You know, I think we’re out of chocolate and Rocky Road, you can go and get some new ones from the back.”

“Yeah, I’m not *that* bored,” she said. She’d been leaning on the ice cream display, now she stood up. “So are you going to that carnival thing tonight?”

“Uh, I don’t know,” he said, wiping down the counter. “I might go see a movie or something. Why, are you going?”

“I might,” she answered. Looking at him, she asked “You wanna

come?”

Steve chuckled. “Are you asking me out?”

“No,” she answered. “Dave and Amanda, they’re going later and I’m tagging along. I was just wondering if you wanted to go, too.”

“Oh. Uh, maybe. I’ll let you know.”

Robin gave him a small smile as they heard somebody approaching the counter. Steve turned, and saw it was, again, two kids he knew: Max and El, or Eleven, or whatever.

“No boyfriends today?” he asked them.

“No,” Eleven responded in her quiet voice.

“Let me guess,” Robin said, “Strawberry and Blue Moon?”

“You got it,” Max confirmed. Robin went about putting their order together, while Steve turned back to the teens in front of him. “What’re you two up to?”

“Shop,” Eleven said, holding up the bag she was carrying.

“Shop *ping*,” Max corrected.

“Dustin’s not with you guys, is he?” Steve asked.

“No, they went to see a movie.”

“Oh, yeah? Which one?” he asked as he rang them up.

“Back to the Future.”

“Ooh, I heard that’s supposed to be good,” Robin said, handing Max her cone.

“Yeah? Maybe I’ll check it out tonight or something,” Steve said.

“You’re not going to the carnival?” Max asked him.

He shrugged. “Maybe.”

Robin handed El her cone. Taking it, Eleven said “Thank you.”

“Don’t mention it,” Robin replied. The two girls said goodbye and walked off. Robin turned to Steve. “Seriously, how many kids are you friends with?”

Again, Steve shrugged his shoulders.

The day went on, and before they knew it, the Party found themselves at the carnival. The boys were the first to get there, talking excitedly about the movie they’d seen. The girls arrived soon after, with Eleven riding the pegs on the back of Max’s bike. The two girls had changed; El now wore a summer dress she’d bought at the mall. And Max, not one for dresses, wore a yellow tank top with her shorts.

As the two made their way over, Mike smiled as he saw his girlfriend for the first time that day. He’d been enjoying time with his friends, but El had, as usual, been in most of his thoughts throughout the day.

They hugged, and as they pulled away, Mike looked her over. “You look beautiful,” he commented.

She ducked her head shyly, causing Mike to blush. One thing he loved about El was how she could be a total badass but still, at times, be shy around him. He kissed her cheek, and their hands found each other.

“You guys ready?” Dustin asked, eager to enter the carnival.

Mike nodded, and the Party made their way inside. Similar to the mall, Eleven was astonished by the newness of the carnival. It wasn’t as big as Starcourt, but there were so many people around that it took a moment to get used to. As her friends discussed where to start, Mike quietly explained some of the things she saw: a pink concoction he called cotton candy. A blue thing with cars called the “tilt a whirl.” A dozen different games where Mike said you could get prizes-the stuffed animals looked intriguing to her. There was a pirate ship that Mike said made him dizzy. Finally she looked up, and her

eyes widened as she saw a big circular construct.

“Oh. That’s the ferris wheel,” Mike told her. “I wanted to go on there with you, if you want.”

El nodded.

“You gonna show her the tunnel of love, Mike?” Dustin joked.

Mike blushed, causing El to frown. “Tunnel of love?” she asked.

“He’s just teasing,” Will said, speaking up and saving his friend.

“Come on,” Max said. “The line for the roller coaster isn’t that long. Let’s go!”

“Roller coaster?” Eleven asked as the group picked up the pace.

“It’s so fun, El,” Will attempted to explain. With his hands, he showed her what to expect, moving it up and down like a wave.

After a short wait in line, the group found themselves in three cars- Max insisted that El ride with her (*you’ll have her on the ferris wheel* , she’d explained to Mike). Mike rode with Will while Dustin and Lucas got in one.

Eleven felt herself get nervous as the ride ascended. When it reached its peak, Max took her hand and raised their arms, saying “Get ready...”

Eleven wasn’t expecting what happened next as the ride dropped, descending fast. All around her she heard screams, and when she looked to Max, her friend said “Scream, El! It makes it more fun!” A second later El found herself screaming, too, and by the time they reached the bottom she was laughing along with Max.

After the roller coaster, the group exposed El to a few more rides, then played a couple of carnival games. El won a big teddy bear on a ring toss game (that she may have cheated in), and Lucas won a Swiss army knife by winning a balloon game. By the time eight o’clock hit, the group was starting to wind down.

“Well?” Lucas asked as the Party sat on a bench. “What do we do next?”

“The fireworks aren’t until eight-thirty,” Dustin said.

“We could do a few more games,” Will suggested.

Sitting next to Mike, Eleven poked his side. Once she had his attention, she pointed upward, at the lit up, rotating ferris wheel. Mike nodded.

“Hey guys? What about the ferris wheel?” he asked his friends.

The group agreed, and after grabbing some food to eat on the ride, they got in line. When it was finally their turn, they climbed into their pods; Mike with El, Max with Lucas, and Dustin and Will. Eleven had bought a puff of cotton candy, and she chewed on it nervously as she awaited the start of the ride.

“Is it scary?” she asked Mike.

“No,” he said, shaking his head. “It goes high, though. It’s just a ride, it takes you up and down.”

She nodded, and handed him a piece of cotton candy. The ride suddenly started, and El watched as the ground in front of her began to disappear, being slowly replaced by the tops of the rides, and pretty soon the tops of trees.

“Wow,” she said, smiling at the scene in front of her.

Their hands were next to each other on the seat, and Mike took hers in his. “Did you have fun today?” he asked.

El turned to him, smiling, and nodded her head. As they began to get closer to the ground, El rested her head on Mike’s shoulder.

The ride went up again, and this time as they neared the top, fireworks began to light up the night sky. Mike watched as first there was a flash of red, followed by a burst of white and then a streak of blue. The girl resting on his shoulder jumped when the first rocket went off, then sat up to inspect what was going on. Mike watched

with a smile as El stared in awe at the sight before them.

“Pretty,” she whispered.

“Son of a bitch, they’re starting early!” they heard Dustin yell in the car above them.

Still, Mike didn’t mind; they had a perfect view of the sky lighting up, and this was the perfect spot for El to see them for the first time.

She turned to Mike. “They’re so pretty,” she told him.

He nodded. “I know.” Even with the rockets going off in front of them, he found he couldn’t look away from Eleven. So when she turned back his way a moment later, he leaned in and kissed her.

He felt her smile, leaning closer as her hands rested on his shoulders.

“Ew, they’re sucking face!” they heard Dustin call.

The two finally pulled apart as they neared the bottom, both with smiles on their faces, and their hands finding each other once more.

Mike couldn’t help but frown, though, a moment later when El touched her forehead. “Is everything okay?”

“Headache,” she said.

“Huh. It could be all the food we’ve been eating,” he offered.

El nodded, and put her head back on his shoulder.

When the ride was over, the group climbed out and watched the rest of the fireworks show. As it finished, Mike glanced at his watch to see the time-ten to nine. He reluctantly turned to El. “It’s almost time.”

She nodded, and said goodbye to everyone. When she was ready to go, she turned to Mike, who was saying something to Lucas. Lucas nodded, then Mike turned to meet her. “Ready?” he asked.

El nodded her head, then she and Mike began to walk to the entrance.

“How’s your head?” he asked as they walked.

“Still hurts.” She rubbed her forehead.

“Let Hopper know.”

They arrived at the entrance, but didn’t see Hopper. El started to go sit on a bench, but Mike began walking in another direction. “Mike?” she asked.

“I wanted to do something,” he said. El caught up, a few steps behind him. They walked a few paces into the nearby woods and Mike, after pausing and searching, stopped in front of a tall tree. El watched as he looked around, then took something out of his pocket; it was Lucas’s Swiss Army knife.

“Mike?” she asked again.

“I wanted to do something,” he said. “Um...Lucas said he did something like this with Max, and I wanted to, you know...do the same with you.” She watched as he opened the knife and stuck it into the tree. It took him a few minutes (and a lot longer than he thought it’d take), but Mike was eventually able to carve a crude looking heart with M + E in the middle of it.

“It’s for you and me,” he explained as he closed the knife.

She smiled, touching it. “Mike plus Eleven?”

“Mike *and* Eleven,” he clarified. “Mike and El.”

Eleven smiled, remembering seeing something like this on television before. “It’s beautiful,” she said, touching the wood.

“Like you,” he said.

She blushed, right before she moved closer and placed a soft kiss on his lips.

“Come on,” he said, taking her hand. “Hopper’s gonna be mad if we’re too late.”

El agreed, and the two began to walk. Out of the corner of his eye, Mike saw her hold her head again. "Are you sure you're okay?"

She stopped walking. "Hurts," she said. She looked up, and Mike gasped as he saw her nose bleeding again. "El?" he started. "You're..."

And that was all he got out before she suddenly dropped, falling into his arms.

Notes for the Chapter:

So in last chapter's notes I said I was going to work like crazy to get this work finished before ST3. Unfortunately, that is probably not going to happen. I have been stressing myself out trying to get this thing done quickly instead of pacing myself. I wanted it done because I have some theories about ST3 that I wanted to include in this story but it's just not going to happen on time. The following chapter to this will be up before July 4, but not sure what'll happen after that. Thanks to the few that've commented, left kudos, subscribed, or bookmarked; I appreciate you.

5. A Terrible Wound

June 21, 1985

The day of Starcourt Mall's grand opening was a sunny one. Despite this, Mason Wedmore arrived at the ribbon cutting ceremony in a somewhat foul mood. Something about this mall hadn't sat right with him ever since his foreman discovered the graveyard in the mall's basement.

Those things...

The graveyard occasionally showed up in Mason's nightmares; those weird, open faced dog looking things that were littered throughout the dig site. What the hell had they been up to, those people in Hawkins Lab? Even returning to the town for the grand opening he felt chills go down his spine.

Things had been taken care of, supposedly-the foreman said they'd gotten rid of the dog's bodies. He hadn't said how, and Mason didn't ask. He himself was supposed to talk to the police about it, but fearing some delay in building Starcourt, he'd kept the information to himself. Mason decided a police investigation would slow things down at least a month, and the bad publicity it would bring would be catastrophic. So Mason figured that as long as the "dog" bodies were disposed of, things would be fine.

The city of Hawkins turned out in droves for the grand opening of Starcourt Mall. Among those there for the ribbon cutting ceremony was Mayor Larry Kline, Chief Jim Hopper, and councilwoman Milidonis. Mason made the rounds, greeting them all before he found the foreman, Ryan Evans, enjoying some finger food.

"Hey, Mr. Wedmore," the man said in greeting. "When'd you get here?"

"Just now," he answered. Then, quietly, asked "What did you do with those....things."

Ryan frowned. "Things? What things?"

Mason sighed, closing his eyes. He was losing his patience. "The dogs," he

said when his eyes opened.

“Oh! We, um...we buried them.”

“Deep?”

Ryan shrugged. “Deep enough.”

“The basement, where they were at...it’s fine?”

“Yes sir, Mr. Wedmore,” he answered, nodding. “Everything’s good.”

Mason gave him a half-smile. It was good to know the things were dead and buried, but he knew they’d probably pop up in his dreams tonight.

He moved on, getting a photo op with the mayor before finally meeting the small town’s chief of police, Jim Hopper.

“Your guys moved fast with this,” the big man said, shaking Mason’s hand.

Mason smiled. “I’ve never gotten behind in construction. In all my ten years.”

“Yeah, that’s what I hear.” The chief put his hands on his hips. “You weren’t a little weary, building this thing here?”

“What do you mean?”

“The lab.”

Mason shook his head. “Everything’s checked and double checked, chief. Whatever gas leak occurred before, it’s all taken care of now.

“Yeah, gas leak,” the chief said, adjusting his hat.

Soon after, Mason, Ryan Evans, Mayor Kline, and councilwoman Milidonis had their picture taken as they cut the ribbon on the mall. Next they were given a tour before they let the general public in. Once the tour was finished, Mason found his foreman, Ryan Evans once more and asked to be shown the basement.

Ryan led the way through a back hallway to an elevator. “I don’t know

why you want to see it,” he told Mason on the way. “I told you, everything’s taken care of.”

Mason knew what the man had said, but he still had a shaky feeling. “I just need to see for myself,” he said after a moment.

A short elevator ride later they were down in the basement. Mason glanced around; everything did indeed look fine. “Thank God,” he said to himself.

“Told you,” Ryan said, shrugging his shoulders. “Ready to go back?”

“Yes,” Mason said with a nod. As he turned, though, something caught his eye. “What’s that?”

“What’s what?” Ryan asked, looking in the direction Mason pointed.

Mason led him behind a shelf where he thought he’d seen something on the ground. Sure enough, what he saw did not make him happy. One of the dog bodies had been unearthed.

“Oops,” Ryan said. “I...I thought we’d buried them all.”

“Son of a bitch,” Mason said. “What’s it doing...” He’d paused because as the two got closer, a cluster of rats that had been feeding on the corpse scurried off. Mason glared at Ryan. “Are you serious?! ”

“We...we’ll take care of it,” Ryan said, looking in the direction of the rats.

“If you had taken care of this in the first place, none of this would’ve happened,” Mason said, storming away and towards the elevator. “And get an exterminator down here.”

“Yessir,” Ryan said as he jogged to catch up, probably making sure he wasn’t left behind.

As they entered the elevator, Mason shook his head. He knew he’d be having nightmares tonight.

Present Day-

9:04. Where the hell were the kids?

Jim Hopper stood at the entrance of the Hawkins Carnival, beginning to grow impatient. He had *specifically* told Eleven to be here, waiting for his pick up at nine. So where the hell was she?

He hadn't heard any strange doings on his radio as he had driven over here, nor did there seem to be anyone panicking.

Screw it.

Tossing the cigarette he'd been smoking, Hopper made his way into the carnival. He flashed his id to the kid selling tickets, and entered, scanning the area. No El.

Don't panic , he told himself. *It's only been five minutes* . As he turned, he thought he saw a red haired girl talking to- yes , he thought as the girl turned. It was El's friend, Max. He made his way over, and the girl and her friends looked up as he got closer.

"Oh, hey chief," the tall one, Lucas said. Frowning for a second, he asked "El's not with you?"

"What do you mean, not with me? She's not with you guys?"

"No," Will said, looking confused. "She and Mike left almost fifteen minutes ago."

Shit , Hopper thought. He spun around, fuming as he made his way back front. *If El and Wheeler are making out somewhere, I'm gonna kill them. Mike first* .

He heard footsteps behind him, and he looked over his shoulder, seeing the kids following him. "Where do you think you're going?" he asked them.

"We'll help you find them," Dustin said.

"...and maybe stop you from killing Mike," Max said quietly.

The group, with Hopper in the front, got back outside of the carnival and looked around.

“Mike!” Will called.

Hopper debated what to do, when he suddenly heard something in the woods. A moment later he saw Mike running out, a terrified look on his face. And he was holding El.

Hopper dropped his guard as he looked at the girl he saw as a daughter. “What happened?”

“I...I don’t know,” Mike said, handing her over to the chief. “We were just walking, and she passed out.”

“Where were you?” Dustin asked as Hopper put her in his truck.

Mike, still looking at El, answered “We were out in the woods, and...”

“Was she using her powers?” Hopper interrupted, seeing the blood under her nose.

Mike looked down nervously. “N-no, she wasn’t.”

Hopper could tell he was hiding something, and grabbed Mike by the shoulders and got down to his level. In a quiet yet firm voice, he said “Listen, kid. Now’s not the time to lie me. Now I need to know. *Was she using her powers?* ”

Mike still wasn’t looking at him, but he stammered out an answer, saying “No, but...”

“But *what* ?” Hopper asked, beginning to lose his patience.

“But she’s been getting nosebleeds recently. Like...without using her powers. And headaches.”

Hopper took his hands off Mike’s shoulders, and sighed as he stood back to his full height. “How long?”

“Huh?”

“How long has this been going on?”

“Uh...the nosebleeds for about a month. The...the headaches, just today.”

Hopper nodded, and closed the passenger door of his cruiser. “You kids go home,” he said, walking around to the driver’s side.

“I’m coming with you,” Mike said.

“No, you’re not.”

“But...”

“I said *no*, kid,” he all but barked at Mike. He knew Mike was just as worried as he was, but Hopper was too mad and scared to have him go with him. “All of you. Go home.” And with that, he got into his cruiser, backed it up, and drove off.

“She just passed out?” Max asked Mike.

He nodded, then suddenly turned and began walking. His friends followed.

“Mike, where’re you going?” asked Will.

Still not speaking, Mike led them to their bike racks. He pulled his towards him and hopped on.

“Uh, Mike?” Dustin asked.

“I don’t care what Hopper said,” Mike told them. “I’m going to the cabin.” To Lucas, he asked “Can you cover for me? Call my mom, tell her I’m staying at your house or something?”

Lucas seemed reluctant, but nodded his head. “Yeah, sure.”

“Thanks,” Mike said. He pedaled away, off into the night.

“El,” Hopper said, alternating between keeping his eyes on the road and glancing at a still unconscious Eleven. “I need you to wake up.”

Still nothing.

Nosebleeds? He thought as pushed down on the accelerator. *Why didn't she tell me?* If anything happened to her...

No, don't think like that , he told himself. *Don't go down the black hole route* .

El was strong. Whatever this was, she'd get through it.

Speaking of "this," he suddenly realized he had no idea how to help her. He was taking her back to the cabin, but after that...then what? He still had Sam Owens's phone number, so he could give him a call if need be.

Dammit , he thought, glancing over at the still girl. *Why didn't she tell me?*

He arrived at the cabin in record time. Once there, he hopped out and, cradling the unconscious Eleven, carried her up the stairs and into the cabin, where he carefully placed her on the couch.

"El," he said, lightly shaking her shoulders. "Kid, wake up. You okay?"

There wasn't a response, so he lowered his head, making sure she was still breathing-she was, but her not waking up was beginning to worry him.

He sat back, sighing and rubbing his face as he thought of what to do. He thought she'd be up by now.

So, reluctantly he stood. After placing a blanket over her, he went to the phone and dialed a number. There were a few rings before an answering machine came on. "Hey, doc," he spoke into the receiver. "It's Jim Hopper. I need you to call me back, soon as you get this. Hear me? As *soon* as you get this."

He hung up the phone, and looked at El. She was still out of it, but was murmuring something he couldn't understand, which Hopper took to be a good sign.

Dammit .

Knowing he wouldn't be able to sleep, he went into the kitchen and began the process of making coffee. While it started, he wet a rag and took to wiping the blood under her nose. Just as he'd finished, Hopper heard crunching leaves outside.

He shot up, and pulled his gun from its holster as he peeked outside. Due to it being dark, he didn't see anything. But a moment later, coming from out by El's window, he heard "El? El?"

"Christ," he moaned, putting his gun on the table. He marched to El's bedroom and opened the window, where Mike Wheeler stood out, just below the windowsill. "I thought I told you to go home," Hopper told him.

Mike shook his head. "I'm not leaving her."

Hopper sighed. He admired the dedication the two had to each other, he really did, but there came a point where it was too much. Still...

"Go around," he told Mike, nodding towards the door. Mike turned and took off, with Hopper slamming the window closed. When he made his way to the front and opened the front door, Mike was inside in a flash, eyes searching for Eleven, no doubt.

"Is she...?"

"She's there," Hopper said, nodding to El's figure on the couch. "I take it your parents don't know you're here?"

"N-no," Mike answered, looking sadly at El. "Is she okay?"

"I don't know, kid. She hasn't woken up yet."

Mike took a seat in the chair next to the couch, eyes worried as he looked to El. Hopper went to the kitchen and finished with the coffee, making himself a mug and bringing it to sit on his bed. He took a sip, debating whether or not to send Mike home, when the boy spoke up. "I'm sorry."

"Sorry for what, exactly? For lying to me? For sneaking out here

when I told you to go home?”

“For not telling you,” Mike finally said.

Taking another sip, Hopper placed his mug down. “And why was that?”

“We...we thought it’d go away.”

“Hm. We or *she* thought it’d go away?”

Mike didn’t answer, but he also couldn’t meet Hopper’s gaze, giving Jim the answer he’d thought. He knew this whole “secret nosebleed thing” had to have been El’s idea; Mike cared about her too much to let this slide. However, Hopper also knew the boy loved her too much to sell her out and admit this was her idea.

Jim took another sip before he said “Look, you can’t stay here tonight. Your mom and dad are probably...”

“I’m not going anywhere,” Mike said, shaking his head. “Lucas is covering for me.” Finally looking at Hopper, he said “And even if he wasn’t, I’m not leaving her.”

That makes two of us, Hopper thought to himself. “Fine. You can stay. But in the morning, you’re leaving. Got it?”

Mike nodded. “Got it.”

Hopper stood, walking his mug into the kitchen.

“What’re you going to do for her?” Mike asked.

“I don’t know, kid,” Hopper admitted. He looked down at El. “I don’t know.”

The next few hours were torture for the both of them. Hopper read the paper while Mike rarely took his eyes off of El. After about two hours of this, though, Hopper saw Mike’s head begin to droop, and ordered Mike to sleep in El’s bed. He fought it, but agreed when Jim promised to wake him if and when she woke up.

Once Mike got settled, Hopper tried to stay up and keep an eye on El, but eventually he, too, began to feel eyes close. So, kissing the top of her head, he got into his own bed and welcomed sleep.

Eleven awoke suddenly around 7 am, heart racing as it took her a moment to realize where she was. Hopper was also awake, sitting up on his bed as he watched her. Their eyes met, and he saw her expression go from frightened to nervous in a matter of few seconds.

“What happened?” she asked.

“You passed out,” he explained. “At the carnival. You were bleeding and...”

“Mike?” she asked, interrupting.

“He’s in there,” Hopper said, nodding towards her bedroom. “You were lucky he was there with you.” He stood. “Want some water?”

El nodded, turning her head to try and peek in her room. As Hopper walked around her, she caught sight of the back of Mike’s head, his face turned away as he slept. Hopper returned a moment later, putting a cup of tap water in her hands. “Drink this,” he instructed.

She obeyed, tipping the water back and welcoming the coolness in her mouth. She was about to ask for more when she met Hopper’s eyes, and suddenly realized how upset he looked.

“El...”

“I’m sorry,” she mumbled, putting down the cup.

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

She shrugged and looked down. “I don’t know.”

“What’s the number one rule, El? Huh?”

“Don’t be stupid.”

“Yes. And keeping that from me was stupid.”

She sniffled, absentmindedly wiping at her nose.

“Are you feeling okay?” he asked.

“Yes.”

“How’s your head? Mike said you were having headaches.”

She rubbed her head. “Just tired.”

Hopper sighed. “Anything else hurting? Your nose, ears...anything?”

“No,” she said, shaking her head.

There was a shuffling of feet, and they both looked up to see Mike enter the room. When he saw El was awake, he shot over and wrapped her in a hug. “Are you okay? Are you still hurt? I had to tell Hopper, I...”

“Mike,” she said with a smile, touching his face and getting him to stop.

“You’re okay?” Mike asked again. She nodded, and rested her forehead on his.

“Jesus,” Hopper moaned, rolling his eyes at the two. “I’m making pancakes. Then Mike’s going home. And we,” he said, pointing to himself and then El, “Are going to talk more about this.”

Eleven nodded, watching as Hopper made his way into the kitchen. When he left, she rested against Mike, who had managed to sit next to her on the couch.

Breakfast was ready soon after, and the three sat around the table to eat. For the most part it stayed quiet, with both Mike and Hopper worried about El. Eleven seemed fine; just tired, is what she would say when they asked.

Halfway through their meal there was a knock at the door, startling the teens. Hopper began to get up for his weapon when they heard a familiar voice talk from behind the door.

“Chief, you in here? It’s Sam Owens.”

The three at the table released a collective breath. Hopper relaxed, standing up to get the door. Eleven frowned, trying to place the name. When Jim opened the door a moment later, though, and her eyes met the guest’s, she remembered who he was.

“You weren’t kidding it’s way out here,” Dr. Owens said as he entered the cabin. He did a once over, looking at the cramped living space, and nodded his head. “Kind of cozy.”

“Why’s he here?” Mike asked as El thought the same thing.

“Why do you think?” Hopper said as he and Dr. Owens made their way over.

“No,” Eleven finally said.

Owens looked to Jim. “No, what?” Hopper asked.

The girl shook her head. “No doctor.”

“El, he’s just gonna see what’s going on with you.”

“No,” she repeated, shaking her head. “Better. I’m better.”

Dr. Owens sighed, and Hopper looked like he was about to yell.

Mike spoke up. “Maybe you should let him check you out, El.” She turned to Mike, surprised. He then continued with “Something’s wrong. It...it wouldn’t hurt. Right?”

Eleven looked up at the doctor, who was watching her nervously. Glancing at Hopper, she nodded her head. “Okay.”

Dr. Owens smiled, and put his medical bag on the table. Mike cleared the plates, while El tried to stay calm. The fact that this was a man from Hawkins Lab didn’t sit well with her; even if he *had* helped her

have somewhat of a normal life, she didn't feel comfortable around him.

"This'd be easier," Owens said, pulling out a thermometer, stethoscope, and small flashlight, "If we were back in my office. But things being how they are," he said with a shrug, "We can't exactly go there, now can we?" He offered a comforting smile to Eleven that she didn't return. Letting out a breath, he looked over at Hopper and said "Tough crowd." He picked up his flashlight, and shone it in El's eyes. "So, young lady, I hear you had a little incident last night."

"Yes," she responded, the light going from one eye to the other.

"Uh-huh. How did you feel? You know, right before you...fell asleep."

"Hurt," she said, touching her head.

"Hm. And now?"

"Better," she answered, looking at both Owens and Hopper.

"Mm-hm." He picked up the stethoscope. "This is gonna be a little cold, okay?"

Hopper looked to Mike. "How about you give her some privacy for a few minutes, kid, huh?"

He looked confused. "What? Why?"

Hopper rolled his eyes. "Jesus, kid, will you just leave the room?"

Mike looked back and forth between Eleven and Hopper before he reluctantly got up and walked into her bedroom.

"Okay," Dr. Owens said. He spent a minute listening to El's heart, then took her temperature. Finally finished, he looked at Hopper, saying "Everything looks and sounds normal, chief."

Hopper shook his head. "Then how do you explain what happened?"

"I don't know; exhaustion, excitement. Overuse of abilities, maybe?"

Hopper folded his arms. "It doesn't make sense." Looking towards Eleven's bedroom, he called "Mike, come on out."

They heard the sound of the springs on El's bed moving and a second later Mike was back. Taking a seat next to Eleven, he asked her if she was alright while Hopper and Dr. Owens talked by the doorway.

"It doesn't make any sense," Hopper said quietly. "I mean, last night she was *out*, doc."

"I understand," Owens said, "And if I could take her to a lab or something I'd be able to understand even more."

"So what're we supposed to do in the meantime?"

Both men glanced over at Eleven; she and Mike were both watching them. "I could use some coffee, if you have some," Dr. Owens stated.

"Yeah, sure, doc," Hopper responded. "We can do that."

Meanwhile at Starcourt, Steve was late coming into his shift. As he finally made his way up to his post at the register, his coworker Robin shot him a look. "You're cutting it close, Harrington," she commented.

"Yeah, tell me about it," he said as he tucked in his shirt. "Is Dave around?" Dave was their boss.

"I haven't seen him."

Steve nodded. There were customers approaching, and he and Robin took their orders. After delivering the ice cream and watching their patrons walk off, Robin turned to Steve.

"What?" he asked.

"Where were you last night?"

"What're you talking about?"

"I thought you were going to the carnival with us."

"Oh. That. I, uh...something came up."

Robin raised an eyebrow. "You mean some *one* came up?"

Steve grinned. "I had a date. I ran into a girl I hadn't seen in a while, and..."

"Hey," Robin said, shrugging, "You don't have to explain anything to me. I was just wondering where you were."

"And that's what I was doing," Steve said, wondering why he was explaining anything to this girl. "How was it?" he asked. "The carnival?"

"It was fun," she said, pulling on the bracelets on her wrist. "Amanda got sick and threw up after the tilt-a-whirl, but other than that, it was fun."

"Hm. Sorry I missed it."

"Me too," she said quietly. "Oh yeah," she added, nodding out towards the food court tables. "Your gang of children are here."

"My what?" He followed her line of vision and saw four familiar teens sitting around a table, eating ice cream and talking.

At their table, the four teens-Lucas, Dustin, Will, and Max-were talking about last night's events and the status of their friends.

"So no word from Mike?" Dustin asked Lucas.

Lucas shook his head. "Nothing. I tried him this morning."

"What about the cabin?" Will asked. "Did anyone call there?"

Lucas frowned. "They have a phone?"

"How did you not know that?" Max asked him.

Lucas shrugged. "We always use the walkies."

"Maybe we should ride up there," Max said. "To the cabin."

The other boys moaned, making the redhead frown. "Why, what's wrong with that?"

"Nothing's *wrong*," Lucas said.

"But Hopper'd be pissed if we all went," finished Dustin.

"Okay, then, maybe just one of us." Max shook her head. "I just hope El's alright."

"What do you think happened?" asked Will.

"Do you think it's related to the Upside Down?" Dustin asked.

"It could be," Lucas said.

"No," Max said. "She closed the gate, right? Isn't it...gone?"

"We thought it was gone before," Will said. "But then last year..."

Dustin looked up and saw Steve make his way over, pulling out a chair and joining their table. "What're you little shits doing here?" he asked.

"What's it look like?" Lucas asked, holding up his cup of slowly melting ice cream.

"So what're you all up to?" Steve asked.

They gave him a brief recap of what'd happened at last night's carnival. When they were done, Steve asked "Is she alright?"

"We don't know," Lucas said. "And I can't get in contact with Mike."

"Where's his mom think he is?" Max asked.

Lucas shrugged. "Probably still at my place. So I need to talk to him, fast." He looked at his watch; it was almost one p.m.

"Do you think," Steve said, whispering, "This has anything to do with, you know...that tunnel or anything?"

"Not sure," Dustin said, looking at Will.

"What?" Will asked, seeing Lucas look at him, too.

"Have you...felt anything?" Lucas asked.

"Like what?"

"A disturbance in the Force," Dustin said.

"No," Will answered. "What do you mean?"

"You're connected to it," Lucas said. "Kind of. You haven't had any visions or anything, have you?"

"No, I would've said something."

"Okay," Dustin said, rubbing his hands, "Here's what we'll do."

"Why are you in charge?" Lucas asked.

"What're you talking about?"

"If Mike's gone, aren't I next in line?"

"Oh my gosh, *guys*," Max said.

"Yeah, come on," Will said.

"It doesn't matter," Dustin said. "We need to find them, and quick."

"Yeah," Lucas agreed. "But everyone knows the chain of command. It goes Mike, me, *then* you, then Will, then Max."

"Why am I after Dustin?" Will asked.

"And why am I last?" asked Max.

"Okay, guys, shut up," Steve said, interrupting. Looking to Dustin, he said "What's your plan, big guy?"

Dustin looked at his friends to see if there were any challengers. Not seeing any, he said "Will, your house is closer. You go and call the cabin, see if anyone picks up. *Lucas* ," he said, turning to him, "You go back home and continue covering for Mike."

"And what am I supposed to do?" Max asked.

"Call El on your walkie, see if she's okay."

"And where will you be in this grand plan of yours?" Lucas asked.

"I'll go up to the cabin," he said. "And do some recon."

"Hopper won't be happy to see you," Will said.

Dustin smiled. "Of course he will. Hopper loves me."

Lucas shook his head. "I've got a bad feeling about this."

Back at the cabin, Hopper and Dr. Owens sat at the table, sipping cups of coffee. Mike and Eleven sat on the couch, talking softly to one another.

"You're sure you're okay?" he asked her for the tenth time in as many minutes.

"Yes, Mike," she answered somewhat impatiently. "Promise."

Mike still looked unsure, but took El's word. Holding her hand, he squeezed it, with her squeezing back as well. "What do you remember? From last night?" he asked.

She took a moment to think before she answered. "We were walking," she began. "Back from that...tree. M and E?"

"Yeah?"

"And...my head...hurt."

"Is that all you remember?"

She nodded. "Then what?"

"I brought you to Hopper, and he brought you home. I came later." Hearing the word "later" come out of his mouth, Mike suddenly looked at his watch. "*Shit*."

"Mike?"

"It's...I can't believe it's already one o'clock. My mom...Lucas...I...I've gotta call Lucas." He looked behind him at the chief. "Can I use your phone?"

Hopper looked at his own watch. "Weren't you supposed to be going home?"

"I will," Mike said, standing up. "But I've got to call first. Please?"

Hopper nodded. "Go ahead, kid."

Mike picked up the receiver, glancing once more at Eleven as he did. He dialed Lucas's number, and a minute later the phone was answered, but not by Lucas.

"Hi, Michael," Mrs. Sinclair said once Mike said who was calling. "Lucas isn't home right now, he went out with his friends....you're not with them?"

"No, um...we were going to meet up, but I couldn't make it. Could you tell him to, uh...call me on the walkie when he gets home?"

"Okay."

"Um...tell him to call me on channel *eleven*," he said, hoping Lucas would get the hint.

"Sure thing, Michael."

"Thanks. Bye." As he hung up, he looked to Eleven; she was slumped over, looking pale. Blood was coming from her nose.

"El!" He said, rushing over. Hopper was up in an instant, with Dr. Owens a few steps behind him.

“What happened?” Hopper asked, moving Mike aside.

“I don’t know. I got off the phone, and she just looked like this.”

“El,” Hopper said, shaking her. Her eyes stayed closed. “Kid, come on, this isn’t funny; wake up.”

Dr. Owens began digging through his medical bag when Eleven suddenly woke up, confused at all the eyes looking at her. Both Hopper and Mike let out a sigh of relief. “Dammit, kid,” Hopper said, wiping away the blood under her nose.

“I’m sorry,” she said quietly.

“Don’t be sorry, El,” Mike said as he knelt down and took her hand. “It’s not your fault.”

Hopper began to say something about how it *was* her fault for not saying anything earlier, but decided to let it be. Looking at Dr. Owens, he said “We’ve gotta do *some* thing, doc.”

Dr. Owens shrugged. “I wish I could. But without an office or a lab to...”

“No lab,” Eleven said.

“Right,” Dr. Owens said. “Plus I’m not all too familiar with the, uh...science that went into her, if you know what I’m saying.”

“I thought you were one of them,” Mike said.

“What?”

“You worked at Hawkins Lab. Don’t you guys have files and things?”

“Before my time, son. What we need is someone who was around then, maybe one of my predecessors.”

A name came to Hopper, but he didn’t dare say it with Eleven within earshot. He was about to pull the doctor aside when Eleven said something quietly. “Kali.”

“What?” he asked.

“Kali,” she repeated. “She could help.”

Dr. Owens looked at Hopper. “What the hell’s a Kali?”

6. Desperate Times

Notes for the Chapter:

As of this posting, ST3 still hasn't come out yet in my time zone. See you all in a few days after I've watched it.

Present Day-

Brent Dover pulled the Hawkins Pest Control van up to Starcourt Mall a little past ten in the morning. He was supposed to have been here at nine-thirty, but some stubborn mice at Merrill's farmhouse kept him longer than anticipated. He knew the customer here-the mall's manager whose name he couldn't remember-would probably complain about his tardiness; he'd get over it.

Brent had gotten the assignment when he first came in this morning: something about a rat problem in the mall's basement. He'd go down there, spray, and then be done with it. At most, it shouldn't take more than fifteen minutes.

Grabbing the tank of spray from the back of the van, he made his way inside. He hadn't been here yet, though the mall had only been open a few days. Maybe this weekend?

He eventually found a customer service counter, and told them why he was there. After a brief waiting period, the man who'd supposedly called it in-a Roger Cooper-met him near the kiosk.

"I called you guys this morning," Roger said as Brent walked behind him, trying to keep up with his brisk pace. "Weren't you supposed to be here already?"

"There was a problem at another site," Brent explained. "And I was the closest one, so...sorry about that."

Roger shook his head. "It is what it is."

They arrived at a door, with Roger unlocking it and leading Brent through. There was an elevator, and Roger pressed the button for it, but nothing happened. "Stupid thing," he muttered. "Come on," he told Brent. "There's some stairs over here."

Brent was more than ready to put the tank down for a minute, but this Roger guy seemed in a hurry, so ignoring the increasing pain in his hand, he followed Roger down the stairs. Once at the bottom, Roger clicked on a light, illuminating the basement.

Brent put the tank down and chuckled. "This is a pretty small basement for all you've got up there."

"This is just part of it," Roger said. "It's mostly for storage and controls and stuff," he said, motioning towards a control panel on the wall. He checked his watch. "Do I need to stay, or...?"

"No," Brent said, shaking his head. "I shouldn't be more than ten minutes top. I'll spray and be done."

"Okay," Roger said, nodding. "I'll leave your payment at the desk. Thanks."

"Yep," Brent said, looking around the room.

When Roger had left, Brent primed the hose and picked up the tank once more. He didn't see any rats, but half the time he didn't. Hey, as long as he got paid, he was happy.

He began to spray in the corners and shadows, then slowly made his way between some of the shelves. He had just sprayed under one of the shelves when he thought he heard something.

Glancing over his shoulder, he asked, "Hello?"

No response.

Shrugging, he continued on, and nearly two minutes passed before he heard it again; a clicking sound, coming from a ways down. Turning that way, he asked again, "Hello?"

Again, there was no answer. His curiosity getting the best of him, he put

down the tank and walked towards where he'd heard the sound. He eventually ended at a wall, where there was a hole leading into the dirt. He smirked. So this is where the rats were coming from, probably. The hole was much bigger than a rat, though; but not big enough that Brent himself could dig through. Not unless he lost a few pounds, at least.

He'd just made a mental note to tell the front desk about it when he heard the clicking again; louder this time. He stooped once more to look inside the hole, and that's when it happened.

He was suddenly face to face with an ugly, nearly faceless beast. It let out a roar as it reached for him, but Brent dodged taking a claw to the face; instead, it ripped into his shoulder, and he cried out in pain as he stumbled up, desperate to leave. He put a hand to his shoulder, feeling the blood as he tried to put some distance between he and the hole.

He didn't look back, but he could hear the clicking again, and it sounded as if the thing-whatever it was-was coming out of the hole and after him.

He almost made it to the stairs.

There was a sudden pain in his back as the creature slashed at him, and he yelped as he fell against the wall, slamming into the control panel and leaving a trail of blood along it. His back was in tremendous pain, and all he wanted to do was to get out, get out...

But those hopes faded as he felt his foot being grabbed, and a second later he was being dragged back towards the hole. The lights above him were flickering, and he had one last final view of the basement steps before everything went black.

. . .

Dustin made good time, riding his bike from Starcourt to the woods near Hopper's cabin. He was proud of himself. Pressing the button on his walkie headset, he asked for a status report from the rest of the party.

Will: "I just walked in the door, Dustin. Give me a minute."

Lucas: "Mike called while I was out. He said something about calling him on channel eleven. I have no idea what he means."

"Well he said eleven; maybe it meant call *her* ? But don't worry about it, I'm almost here."

Dustin smiled cockily; *and Lucas said I couldn't be in charge.*

Pressing the speaker button once more, he asked "Max? What about you?" When there was no response, he tried again. "Max? You there? Over." Still nothing. He shrugged, figuring maybe she wasn't home yet. He figured he'd try again when he arrived at the cabin.

However, as he got even closer, he heard a noise in the woods; a branch breaking or a leaf crunching. He paused. "Hello?" No response.

Dustin continued on, and the cabin was in sight when he heard it again; that's when his walkie crackled.

"Guys," said Will's voice. "I called the cabin. Mike's there."

"Tell him to call me," Lucas responded.

"Guys," Dustin whispered, looking around him. "I think something's after me."

"What?" came Will's voice.

"I'm in the woods. There's something...I *hear* something."

"Do you see anything?" asked Lucas.

"No. I'm gonna make a run for it."

"It's probably just a squirrel or something."

"I don't think so. I'm going to go for the cabin. Wish me luck."

"Dustin..."

He turned off his walkie, dropped his bike, and began to run. Unfortunately, just as he arrived at the cabin, he forgot about the tripwire and fell over it, setting off a small sequence of explosions. He covered his head and ears as noise erupted above him. When the sounds ceased, he looked up and saw what had been “chasing” him in the woods.

“You are seriously so easy to scare,” Max said, standing above him.

“What’re you...that was *you*? ”

“Yeah,” she said, offering her hand and pulling him up.

“I thought I said to go call El.”

“And why bother when I can just come over?” she asked. Dustin brushed himself off. “The chief’s going to kill you,” Max told him.

Dustin shook his head. “Hopper loves me.”

The cabin door suddenly opened. Chief Hopper emerged, gun raised. When he saw what’d set off the alarm, he lowered his weapon and rolled his eyes. “For God’s sake!” he said.

“Hey chief,” Dustin said, smiling and waving.

“Get inside before I shoot you,” Hopper said, scanning the woods around them. Dustin and Max hightailed it into the cabin.

As they entered, both stopped as they took in the scene before them: a gray haired man stood near the couch, looking surprised to see them; Mike, kneeling next to the couch; and Eleven, sitting up and seeing who the two new house members were.

“El, you’re alright,” Max said, rushing over and hugging her friend.

“Dude,” Dustin said, walking over as well but going to Mike. “Your mom’s gonna kill you.” Quietly, he asked “Did you spend the night here?”

“Yeah, in the other room,” Mike said, pointing towards the bedroom. “What’re you two doing here?”

"Yeah, my thoughts exactly," Hopper said as he put his revolver down on the table.

"We were looking for Mike," Dustin explained.

"*And* wanting to know how El was doing," Max added.

"That too," Dustin agreed. Looking at the gray haired man, he asked Hopper "Who's this guy?"

"Doctor," Eleven spoke up.

"That's Doctor Owens," Hopper said. "He's here to help."

Dr. Owens chuckled. "I don't think I *can* help, chief. What about this Kali person?"

"Who's Kali?" Dustin asked.

"It's El's sister," Max answered.

"Kind of," Mike said.

"Kind of?" Dustin asked.

"It's...compliatal," Eleven said, sitting up.

"You mean complicated," Hopper corrected. "But that doesn't matter. How the hell're we supposed to find this girl, anyway?"

"Wait, you have a sister?" Dustin asked Eleven. When she nodded, he asked "Does she have powers like you?"

"Not like me," El answered. She stood up.

"Whoa, kid, where're you going?" Hopper asked her.

"Blindfold," she responded. She walked into her bedroom, and a minute later came out with a black strip of cloth.

"No," Hopper said, shaking his head. "You're not using your powers."

Eleven sat back on the couch. "Kali can help," she insisted.

"El, maybe you shouldn't," Mike said. "Maybe he's right."

"Mike?" she asked, confusion coming to her face as she turned to him.

He looked at his feet before he continued. "You were...pretty out of it last night. And that was without even *using* your powers. I just don't want it to happen again, you know? Maybe there's another way."

"And how do you know she can help?" asked Hopper.

"I don't know," Eleven answered. "But we can try."

"But even if we find her," Max said, "Then what? Bring her here?" Looking at El, she asked "Didn't you find her in Philadelphia or someplace?"

"Chicago," Eleven corrected, flicking on the television with her mind.

"Jeez," Hopper said, reaching over and turning to a staticed channel.

"Yeah," Max continued, "But say she's there, then what?"

"Then we go find her," Mike answered.

"No, *you're* not going anywhere," Hopper told the gathered kids. " *I* will decide what happens next."

All eyes turned to Eleven, who wrapped the blindfold over her eyes. Taking a deep breath, she then tied it behind her head.

A moment later she was in the Void, focusing all of her abilities on one person, one name: Kali. It took a few seconds, but she eventually heard her "sister's" voice. She followed it, her footsteps splashing in the water beneath her feet as she did so. As she got closer, the image before her became clearer: Kali sat in a chair while others she recognized-Funshine, Axel, Dottie, and Mick-sat facing her.

"...going to be close, but I think we can do it," Kali said, moving something around that Eleven couldn't see.

"You said that last time, and look where that got us," Axel sneered.

"Last time there was no plan. This time there is," Kali retorted. "Now. We need to..." She paused, as if sensing something. She immediately looked up, and it was as if she looked right at Eleven. "Jane?"

El stopped in her tracks, surprised. "K...Kali?"

The scene before her began to evaporate, but not before Eleven got a glance at something as it disappeared into smoke.

Pulling the blindfold off, she caught her breath as she felt the familiar taste of blood on her upper lip. Mike and Max were sitting beside her, while Dustin, Hopper, and the doctor stood, watching with interest.

"El, are you alright?" both Mike and Max asked.

She nodded, gently pushing away their worrying hands, as she turned to Hopper. "Hanover," she said, wiping at her nose. "Kali...is by a street called Hanover."

"You're sure?" he asked.

She nodded. "I saw outside. Street sign."

"Hanover Street," Dr. Owens mused, "That's in Boston."

Hopper rubbed his face. "Then I guess I'm going to Boston."

Dr. Owens snorted a laugh. "Chief, are you sure this'll even..."

"No, but do you have a better idea?" Hopper asked. Turning to the kids, he said "You all need to go. *Now*."

"But..." Mike began.

"But nothing. Go home, you can talk to her later."

Dustin said goodbye to El, Max put a hand on El's shoulder as she passed, and Hopper pretended not to see Mike give El a kiss after he whispered something to her. The kids then made their way out of the

cabin.

"I'm going with you," Eleven said to Hopper.

"No, you're not," Hopper said.

"Yes I am," she said back.

Dr. Owens looked between the two.

"Kid," Hopper said, "You can barely stand up. You're not going anywhere but back to sleep."

"Kali doesn't know you," she explained. "She knows *me* . Let me go and..."

"El," Hopper said, firm but not too loud, "You're. Not. Going."

Eleven glared at him, and began to get a certain look in her eye as dishes began to rattle.

"Unh-unh," Hopper said, knowing she was more than likely going to use her powers. "Don't even think about it; knock it off."

El continued to glare, but the rattling stopped. Dr. Owens, who a few seconds ago looked terrified, put a hand on his chest. "Oh, thank God," he muttered.

"*I* will take care of this," Hopper said.

Eleven *hmpfhed* , folding her arms in the process. "Fine," she muttered.

"Hey," Dustin said, calling out to Mike and Max who walked a few feet ahead of him. "How come I never knew Eleven had a sister?"

"She's not really a sister," Max replied as the three made their way through the woods. Mike walked his bike while Max walked behind him, Dustin bringing up the rear.

"Then why'd she call her that?"

"They're both from the lab," Mike answered, shaking his head.

"Oh."

"What's with you?" Max asked Mike.

"I should've stayed," he answered. "El needs me."

"She's going to be fine," Max said. "She's a total badass."

"And Hopper's with her," Dustin chimed in.

"Still," Mike said.

"So do you think he's really going to go to Boston?" Max asked the boys. "You know, to find Kali?"

"Probably," Mike answered. "I don't think he really has a choice."

"But just because Kali has powers, doesn't mean she can help Eleven," Dustin explained.

"But the chief's right," Mike countered. "What else can they do?"

"Wait for her to get better," Dustin said, shrugging.

"But maybe the same thing has happened to Kali," Max said. "And she could help."

"But what if she can't? Then what?" Dustin asked.

Mike stopped and spun around. "Can you stop being so damn pessimistic for two minutes, Dustin?"

Dustin put his hands up. "I'm sorry. I'm just, you know...curious."

"Well be curious about something else," Mike said, turning back around and marching on. Max looked over her shoulder and gave a sympathetic look to Dustin before following Mike.

"Dustin? Dustin, do you copy" they heard Lucas's voice ask. Dustin, remembering he'd turned his walkie back on after exiting the cabin, fumbled with the headset a moment before responding. "Yeah, Lucas,

I copy, over.” In front of him, Mike and Max paused.

“Did you make it to the cabin? Is everything alright? Over.”

“Yeah, I made it,” Dustin said as the group continued.
“Uh...everything’s kinda alright. Over.”

“What do you mean, *kinda* ? Over.”

“I’ll explain it to you later,” Dustin said, smiling when he saw the bike he’d dropped when he thought he was being chased. He picked it up before he spoke into the walkie, saying “Over.”

“Where’s Mike? Over.”

“We’re heading back into town,” Dustin answered. “He’s going home. Over.”

“Okay. Tell him he owes me. Over and out.”

Dustin clicked off the walkie as the three kept walking, eventually reaching the end of the woods. Max’s bike lay on it’s side, and she picked it up as Dustin spoke to Mike. “Sorry about, you know...the whole El thing.”

“I know,” Mike said, nodding. “I’m just worried about her.”

“We all are,” Dustin said. “She’s gonna get better.”

Mike sighed, and glanced in the direction of the cabin. “I hope so.”

The three mounted their bikes, and began the ride back into town.

Back at the cabin, Hopper was sitting on his bed, tossing clothes into a duffel bag. When he heard the soft *click* of the bedroom door being closed, he looked up to see Sam Owens.

“How is she, doc?” he asked as he threw in a pair of semi-clean socks.

“Right now, she’s fine,” the doctor answered. “But that’s not to say how she’ll be in an hour, tonight, tomorrow...”

"Yeah, I get it." Hopper zipped his bag shut and stood. "Thanks, doc. I owe you one."

"You have my number, you know where to find me, if..." Dr. Owens gestured with his hands.

"Uh-huh. I got it. Thanks," Hopper said. Dr. Owens nodded goodbye, then left the cabin.

Hopper sat at the table, closed his eyes, and thought. He had no clue what to do with Eleven while he was gone. He knew she wanted to come with him, but that was out of the question. He couldn't leave her here by herself; not in her condition. That left...well, one person, really.

"Hopper?"

The voice came from two feet away from him and he jumped. Eleven stood nearby in her pajamas.

"Jesus, kid," he said, letting out a breath; he forgot how quiet she could be sometimes. "You scared the hell out of me."

"Sorry," she apologized. Taking a seat across from him, she asked "What will happen?"

Hopper sighed. "I'm getting on a train in a few hours, I should be in Boston later tonight. I'll find her."

El nodded, but looked as if she still didn't like this arrangement. "I will stay here?"

"No," he said with a shake of his head. "If you were feeling better, maybe. Speaking of which...how are you?"

She shrugged. "Tired. Head hurts."

He nodded. "You're going to stay with a friend."

Her eyebrows raised with hope. "Mike?"

He chuckled. "El, what kind of father would I be if I let you two sleep

in close proximity like that?”

She furrowed her eyebrows. “Close proximity?”

“Never mind. No, you’re not staying with Mike.” He stood and made his way to the phone. Dialing a number, he added “Go and pack a bag. We’re about to leave.”

At Starcourt Mall, Robin was leaving while Steve was beginning to work the counter by himself for a few hours, until the mall closed.

“Have fun,” Robin said, giving him a wave as she left.

Steve gave her a fake smile as she walked off. He still didn’t know what to think of her; she was nice to talk to, but she was weird, to say the least. Then again, Steve felt that lately weirdness had taken over his life in the past two years. Ever since he got involved with Nancy Wheeler.

Nancy...

He’d heard things, of course. How she was spending the summer working with Jonathan at the Hawkins Post and how the two seemed to be so happy together. Steve didn’t see them around town much; but when he did it was, for the most part, friendly. They seemed happy.

As for Steve himself, he was still struggling to figure things out. He wasn’t sure if college was going to be an option. There was no way he was going to work for his dad. This job was supposed to be just a summertime thing, but the more time went on, the more it appeared it may be permanent.

Well, he told himself, at least I won’t be short on ice cream.

Speaking of which...

He noticed that both the U.S.S. Butterscotch and Chocolate Ships Ahoy were almost empty. “Hey, Eric,” he said to a coworker mopping the floors. “I’ll be right back.” Eric nodded, and Steve went to the

backroom. One of his coworkers, Dave, was sitting in the back listening to his Walkman. Steve gave him a nod as he passed by, going into the freezer. He'd only put one foot inside when he noticed something was wrong-it wasn't nearly as cold as it usually was.

"Hey," he said to Dave as he emerged from the freezer.

Dave took his headphones off. "What?"

"I don't think the freezer's working."

Dave shrugged. "Must be broken."

"Yeah, I got that," Steve said. "How do we fix it?"

"The fridges and freezers and stuff have a master control thing in the basement," Dave said, putting his headphones back on.

"Thanks," Steve said sarcastically.

He left the backroom, walking down the corridors until he got to the locked door that led downstairs. *Why hadn't anyone else noticed this?* He thought to himself. He'd never been in the basement before, but when first employed, had gotten a quick tour of the mall. He knew there was an elevator that took you down, but his 10 minute tour hadn't included a view of the basement.

Finding the elevator not working, he found stairs that led below. When he arrived in the cool basement, he tried flicking on the lights but found they didn't work. "Stupid mall," he grumbled to himself. Feeling along the wall, his hands touched something wet. Ignoring it, he kept moving until he felt something that *could* be, as Dave said, "master control thing." He found a hatch on the side, and pulled it open to inspect. With the lights out, he couldn't really tell what he was looking at. Deciding it'd be better to come back with a flashlight or walkie, he slowly made his way back the way he came. Once he got back on the stairs he climbed up, and didn't notice his hands until he'd reached for the door back to the mall.

Steve knew he'd touched something wet downstairs, but figured it was just water. Now, though, he saw it for what it really was-blood.

He turned, glancing back down at the basement. *What the hell?*

Scrambling to know what was going on, he pushed open the door, rushing back to *Scoops Ahoy* 's office. Eric, behind the counter and looking lost, looked at Steve as he rushed past him. "Dude!"

Ignoring him, Steve went back into the office, going to his manager's desk as Dave took his headphones off. "Did you fix it or what?" he asked.

"No," Steve answered, finding the flashlight he was looking for. "Go help Eric."

He then burst from the backroom and raced to the basement. Once he descended the stairs, he turned on the flashlight. "Whoa."

There was blood; some on the wall, where his hand had touched it. Even worse, there was a small puddle on the floor, and a trail that led further into the darkness of the basement. Steve gulped as he debated what to do.

Deciding to do the relatively easy thing first, he found the control box, saw a button that read *freezer* , and tapped it. He heard a humming sound, but that was about it.

He then decided to do what he knew he shouldn't, and followed the trail of blood. Cautiously stepping (and wishing he had a certain nailed bat with him), he slowly walked beside the trail, stopping when it got to a wall on the far side of the basement. Raising the beam of the flashlight, he saw why the trail had ended-there was a hole in the wall. Not a very big hole, but one about the size of a dog.

"Ah, shit," he said to himself.

A few miles away, Joyce Byers opened the curtains as she heard Hopper's cruiser pull up outside.

"Are they here?" she heard Will ask from the kitchen table.

"Yeah," she answered. "They're here." She let the curtains go and

walked to the door, opening it as a light breeze helped her out. As she stepped outside, she could hear Will getting up from the table, moving to join her outside. In front of her, the cruiser came to a stop and a second later, both members of the Hopper family stepped out; Eleven held a small bag at her side.

“Hi, sweetie,” Joyce said, smiling at the teen girl. “Jonathan gave up his room, you can set your bag in there.” El smiled, and she and Will went inside. Joyce turned to the town’s chief of police. “You’re really going to Boston?”

Hopper shrugged, putting his hands in his pockets. “It’s not too far, only a couple of hours. I should be back sometime tomorrow.”

Joyce sighed, glancing back at the house. When she turned back to Hopper, she asked “How’s she been?”

“She’s been good for the last few hours. But she’s tired. Just make sure she gets some sleep and doesn’t exert herself too much, willya?”

Joyce nodded. “How are you holding up?”

“I’m tired, too, to be honest,” he admitted. “I stayed up all night with her. But I’ll sleep on the train.” Glancing at his watch, he said “I gotta go.”

“Okay,” she said. “Call when you get there, alright?”

Hopper nodded. “Call the doctor if there’s anything wrong, okay?”

“I will. You take care, Hop.”

He nodded again, and glanced at the house. Joyce wasn’t sure, but she thought she saw a wistful look in his eyes. “Take care of her, alright?”

Joyce smiled sympathetically. “I will. Good luck, Hop.”

Hopper let out a breath before tipping his hat, and climbing back into the cruiser. Joyce watched as he started the engine, backed up, and drove off.

7. Desperate Measures

Notes for the Chapter:

Thank you for being patient and sorry about the wait; things have been, and continue to be, busy. This is a long chapter, so buckle up. Not much Mileven, but plenty of other stuff. I'll try and put more Mileven in the next chapter.

Again, thanks for being patient, and enjoy.

Earlier-

Kali sat in the room she currently used as a bedroom, a confused look on her face as she thought about what'd just happened.

Was that her? Did she really just see Jane?

*No, she thought, correcting herself. She hadn't *seen* Jane, it was more like...a feeling. It was as if she could feel her "sister's" presence in the room.*

She wasn't sure yet how she felt about it.

On the one hand, Jane was probably the closest thing to a relative she had. She'd never known her parents, and although her friends now-Dottie, Mick, Funshine and Axel-were family, she and Jane had a shared history.

*On the other hand, the girl *had* just left her to return to her policeman and friends back in Hawkins. It had taken Kali a while to get over that, when she thought they'd belonged together, avenging the wrongs done by Hawkins Lab.*

A knock at the open doorway snapped her from her thoughts, and she looked up to see Mick standing in the doorway.

"You alright?" she asked, taking in Kali.

"I'm fine," Kali said.

"Well, good, because Axel's out here bitching about what's going to happen next."

Kali rubbed her face, frustrated. "I'll be out in a minute."

Mick began to turn, but paused. "You really think you saw her? Jane?"

*Kali looked up, shaking her head. "I didn't *see* anyone. It was more like a feeling."*

Mick smirked. "I didn't have you pegged as someone who believes in all that auras and chakra shit." She left the room, leaving Kali with her thoughts. After another minute of thinking, Kali stood and joined her friends in the other room.

"Finally," Axel said as she entered the room. "I mean, it's not like we've been waiting or anything."

"Do you need another replay of spiders?" Kali asked. "Or are you going to be a good boy?"

Axel waved her off, taking a cigarette from his pocket as he shook his head.

"You alright?" Funshine asked Kali.

"I'm fine," she answered.

"Well, then, what're we going to do?" Dottie asked nervously.

Kali sighed. "Alright. Here's how it's going to happen."

She went on to detail her plans for their next target; all the while, though, she kept thinking back to Jane's presence an hour ago, wondering what it meant and what was to come.

It'd been a rush at the train station, but Hopper was now on his way, non-stop from Hawkins, Indiana to Boston, Massachusetts. He'd been wrong when he told Joyce it only took a few hours; the lady who sold the tickets told him he'd be there by mid-afternoon tomorrow at the

earliest.

Well , he thought to himself, *At least El's in good hands* .

He hadn't wanted to leave her. If they were together, he knew she was safe. But given how she'd been going back and forth between bleeding and being perfectly fine, he knew it wasn't the best thing to have her join him. And if she couldn't be with him, then Joyce was the next best thing.

The train cabin he was in was sparsely populated. A mom with her two kids; an elderly woman looking out the window. Two couples. Seeing the kids reminded him of Sara, and how she used to love it when they would take train rides to see Diane's parents in upstate New York.

Thinking about Sara got him thinking about Eleven once again. He knew she wasn't his, biologically; but that girl was his daughter, his heart. He'd do anything for her.

As the train finally began moving, his thoughts drifted to what he'd find in Boston. *Hanover Street* , he reminded himself. That was where Kali was supposed to be. He didn't know how this girl would react to seeing a cop, but he figured one way or another they'd talk about El. And if she couldn't help, well...he'd think of something.

He'd already lost one daughter; he wasn't going to lose another.

Hopper pulled the brim of his hat down, closing his eyes as the train began to pick up speed. He was more tired than he realized. All of this worrying about El and her health had worn him out. He drifted off to sleep, hoping that the miracle he was hoping for was on the other side of this journey.

*

Back at the Byers' home, Eleven sat on Jonathan's bed, walkie in hand as she told Mike what had happened.

"So he really went?" Mike asked after El had caught him up on everything.

“Yes.”

“Did he say when he’s coming back?”

“No,” she replied. “But Mrs. Byers said sometime tomorrow.”

“Oh.” A pause, then he asked “Are you okay?”

She didn’t answer for a moment, thinking about how she felt at the moment. “I’m okay,” she finally said. “But I wish Hop was here.”

Mike sighed. “Well, at least he’ll be back soon. And hopefully he’ll have an answer. How are you feeling? Any nosebleeds or anything?”

“No,” she said, shaking her head. “Just tired.”

“Hm. Well, then, I’ll let you sleep, El. And I’ll be over tomorrow, first thing, alright?”

“Alright. Night, Mike.”

“Goodnight, El.”

She clicked off, and as she did, there was a knock at the door. It opened, and Joyce came in. “I thought you might want some water,” she said, placing a glass on the bedside table.

“Thank you.”

Joyce smiled, and nodded her head. El looked outside the window, and Joyce recognized the sad look on the young girl’s face.

“Hey,” Joyce said, sitting on the bed. “Hop’s gonna be fine.”

El looked down at her hands, not answering.

“You miss him?” Joyce asked.

“I...should have gone with him,” El explained. “Kali doesn’t know him. I don’t want him to get hurt.”

Joyce smiled. “Sweetie, I think you need to worry about if Hop is going to hurt your friend.” When Eleven didn’t return the smile,

Joyce put a hand on her leg. "Hop can take care of himself."

"I know," El said, nodding. "Thank you."

Joyce gave her leg another pat, then stood. "I'm going to take a shower. Call if you need anything, alright?"

"Okay," El said, nodding.

When Joyce got to the door, she turned around and looked back at El; she frowned. "El?"

"Yes?"

"Sweetie, your...your nose is bleeding."

Eleven put a finger above her lip, and her eyes widened when she felt the familiar substance there. She reached for a tissue, and dabbed at her nose. In the doorway, Joyce looked worried.

Hopper hadn't really told her what to do if this happened. "Are you okay? How do you feel?" she asked, walking back to the bed.

"Fine," El said, placing the tissue next to the lamp. Joyce felt her head. "Oh, you're burning up," she told the young girl. "I'm going to get you some aspirin, then you're going to need to rest."

As she left the room, Joyce thought to herself *I hope you find what you're looking for, Hop* .

*

The next morning, Dustin awoke to somebody pounding on his front door. Still half asleep, he turned and looked to his alarm clock to see the time-8:13, still too early to get up.

"Mooom," he called, closing his eyes once more. "The door!"

When there was no response from his mother, he recalled that his mom had more than likely already gone into work. Still, his eyes remained shut, as he hoped whoever it was at the door-Mormons, maybe?-would take the hint and leave.

No such luck.

The door knocking was soon replaced by incessant doorbell ringing, annoying enough that Dustin, beyond frustrated at this point, clamored out of bed. “Son of a *bitch!* ” he muttered as he left his room and went to the front door. Yanking it open, he said “Do you have *any* idea what time it is?”

He was surprised when he saw it was Steve Harrington, wearing his *Scoops Ahoy!* uniform, on the other side of the door. “Steve?”

“Thank God, man,” Steve said, brushing past Dustin and coming into the house. Dustin noticed the young man looked frazzled; from what, he wasn’t sure of yet.

“What’re you doing here?” Dustin asked.

“Is your mom here?” Steve asked, looking around him.

“No, she’s at work,” Dustin answered. “Steve? Why’re you here?”

“Because I can’t find Hopper,” Steve said. He ran a hand through his hair, then seemed to finally notice Dustin. “Dude, you’re still in your pajamas?”

Dustin looked down at his pj’s. “It’s 8:15. Why are you looking for Hopper?”

Steve walked into the next room, plopping onto the couch. “The mall,” he began, as Dustin made his way into the room.

“The mall?”

“Yeah, the mall. There’s something... *there* . Something that’s, like...not good.”

Dustin shook his head. “I don’t follow.”

“From the freaking Upside Down, man!” Steve exclaimed, getting to the point. “I went into the basement last night to, you know, get the power working and there was a trail of blood that led into a hole in the wall.”

Dustin frowned, finally taking a seat. “What makes you think it’s something from the Upside Down?”

“Why do I think it’s something from the Upside Down? Oh, I don’t know, because we live in freaking *Hawkins*,” Steve said, rubbing his face. “With all the weird shit we’ve seen the last two years, why *wouldn’t* it be from there?”

Dustin thought for a moment before commenting, saying “Hopper’s gone.”

That took Steve by surprise. “What do you mean, he’s ‘gone’?”

“El is sick,” Dustin explained. “He went off to find someone who can help her.”

“What happened? Is she gonna be okay?”

Dustin shrugged. “We hope so.” He stood, and walked off towards his bedroom.

“Dude!” Steve called. “Where’re you going?”

“To get dressed,” Dustin yelled back. “Then we’re going to find out what’s going on.”

*

A little while later, Mike was on his way to the Byers home. After a quick breakfast and a change of clothes, he was now biking over to see El.

He had barely slept last night, as his thoughts kept drifting to El. That in of itself wasn’t anything out of the ordinary, but with Hopper gone and Eleven on the fritz, he’d found that his girlfriend was in his thoughts more than usual.

Mrs. Byers would undoubtedly take good care of El, but Mike still felt that it was *his* job to keep the girl safe. Regardless of the fact that he had no idea of *how* to help her, he still felt an obligation to do his best. Besides, that’s what you did for the people you love.

He nearly crashed his bike as that last thought went through his mind; *love* .

He'd recently began allowing himself to think about that word and Eleven. There wasn't anything he wouldn't do for her; and she was, hands down, the most important person in the world to him. He also knew, as he'd known for a long time-maybe since the moment he'd met her-that he loved her; that went without saying.

But although he *felt* it, he still didn't think it was the right time to *say* it. Technically, he hadn't even officially asked her to be his girlfriend; a problem he was hoping to take care of today, should the moment arise.

He put those thoughts to the side as he finally arrived at the Byers house. Skidding his bike to a stop, he dropped it in the grass before walking up to the door and knocking. A moment later the door opened, and he was met by Will. The two boys exchanged greetings, before Mike asked what was on his mind.

"How is she?"

"She's okay," Will admitted. "She got a nosebleed last night, but other than that, she's been fine."

Will led Mike to Jonathan's room, where Eleven currently sat on the bed, flipping through a magazine. As Mike entered the doorway, her eyes lifted and met his, making both of them smile.

"Mike," she said, putting down the magazine.

"Hey El," he said, coming inside. Taking a seat on the bed, he asked "How are you?"

"Good."

"Your head's okay?" he continued. "Are you tired? Do you feel..."

"Mike," she said, smiling as she took his hand. "I'm okay."

He nodded, and cast a glance at Will, who was still standing by the door. Will seemed to take the hint, and excused himself from the

room.

Turning back to El, Mike asked “Did you sleep okay?”

“Yes,” she said, nodding; the lines under her eyes told otherwise, though. Looking to the window, she said “But Hop...”

“No word yet?”

She shook her head.

“He’s going to be fine, El. He’s probably already on his way back.”

She smiled weakly at the thought, and tugged lightly on his hand, bringing him closer to her. Mike kicked off his shoes, and lay against the headboard, next to her. “Have you had anything to eat?” he asked. “Did Mrs. Byers...”

“Mike,” she said, putting her head on his shoulder. “I’m okay. Stop...worrying.”

“I’m sorry,” he said. Shaking his head, he added “I couldn’t really sleep last night; all I could think about was if you were okay, or if you were going to pass out again. I wanted to be here.”

“I know,” she said, letting out a sigh as she looked at their conjoined hands. “But...you’re here now.”

He let out a sigh of his own before resting his head atop of hers. After a moment of quiet, he asked “Do you really think your sister can help?”

“I hope so,” she replied, squeezing his hand.

“Whatever this is,” he said, “Maybe it’ll go away on it’s own? I mean, you seem better and everything.”

But El shook her head. “It won’t...go. I need help.”

Mike sighed; that wasn’t really what he wanted to hear. As if sensing his disappointment, El said “Kali will help.”

*

It had taken longer than usual, but Jim Hopper had finally arrived in Boston. Had it been any other time, he'd consider seeing what the town had to offer; maybe try and find the bar they used in *Cheers* . But that wasn't why he was here.

He hailed a cab and, once inside, simply told the driver "Hanover Street." The driver nodded, and Hopper was on his way.

He watched the big city pass as the taxi made its way through the bustling city. *I've got to come back here sometime* , he thought to himself. Jim wasn't much for calling things pretty, but the city of Boston sure did fit that description. Maybe before the summer was over, he could bring El for a visit.

El .

Hopper wondered how she was; was she bleeding? Was she still passing out? He'd promised Joyce he would call when he arrived in Boston, but he'd been so focused on finding a cab (not to mention being a bit groggy from his nap) that he'd forgotten about it. He figured he would call for a check in once he talked to Kali.

Speaking of El's "sister," he was still trying to figure out how to approach the young woman. From what El had told him, Kali traveled with somewhat of a motley crew. Once they saw a cop coming for them, things could get hostile. He thought back to his talk with El as they'd driven to Joyce's last night

"How many people are with her?" he'd asked.

El had taken a moment before answering, saying "Four."

Hopper had nodded. "And Kali's the only one that can...do stuff, right?"

"Yes," El answered. But there was something in the way she'd responded that had Hopper curious.

"What?" he'd asked.

She'd paused again, before saying "Are you going to...hurt her?"

"I'm not planning on it," he replied.

"She...Kali...is..." She'd stopped, looking for the right word. "Mad. She doesn't like police."

*Hopper had grinned. "Well, that's only because she hasn't met *me* yet." When El didn't return the smile, instead looking serious, Hopper had said "Look, kid, I'm not going to hurt her. We're just going to talk and see how we can go about getting you fixed, okay?"*

El nodded. "Okay."

And now, in the cab, Hopper hoped he'd been telling the truth.

The taxi braked to a stop, and Hopper looked out the window, confused. "Why're we stopping?"

"We're here," the driver said.

"Huh. You're fast," Hopper pointed out, digging into his pocket and producing payment for the fare, plus a few dollars for the tip.

He climbed out, and tried to recall what El had remembered from her dream. *Hanover Street. She could see a sign, something that began "Tra..." outside of Kali's window.*

So Jim began making his way up the street, taking in the sights and checking the names on buildings as he did so. The sidewalk was busy, with people making their way to wherever they needed to go. There were some friendly faces, and some not-so-friendly faces. As he crossed a street, one face in particular stuck with him-a man with a tall mohawk, tattoos and earrings who smoked a cigarette, glaring at Jim as he passed.

Another MTV punk , Jim thought to himself.

After a few more minutes of searching, Hopper thought he'd found what he was looking for. On his side of the street was a restaurant, whose sign read "Trattoria II Panino." Hopper looked at the building across the street; were those apartments?

He crossed the street to investigate, and frowned when he saw that

this was the kind of building he'd need to be buzzed into. Not being able to think of anything else, he picked one at random and pressed the intercom; nothing.

He tried another one-again, nothing.

He pushed a third button, and this time was met with a brusque "Yeah?"

"Hey, uh...I think I locked myself out of my apartment. Any chance I could get you to buzz me in?"

Almost immediately there was a buzzing sound, and he grinned as he pushed open the door.

That grin soon disappeared, though, as he felt the muzzle of a gun pressed into his back. He began to turn, but that got the gun pressed deeper into his back. However, the door in front of him was mirrored, and he could see his attacker-the mohawked man from earlier.

"Who the hell are you?" the man hissed.

*

Back in Hawkins, Steve and Dustin had just arrived at Starcourt Mall. The building was bustling with people as usual, but all the two cared about was what lurked in the basement.

"Shit," Steve said, remembering something as they neared the food court.

"What?" asked Dustin.

"The lights, they were out down there. I need to grab a flashlight."

Dustin made a face. "You never said it was *dark* down there."

Steve gave him a look as he stopped in his tracks. "We're about to see if there's a monster down in the basement, and you're afraid of the dark?"

"I'm not afraid," Dustin said, shifting from one foot to another. "I just...would prefer it be light."

Steve rolled his eyes. "Come on, beef cake."

The two hurried over to *Scoops Ahoy!*, where Robin stood behind the counter. Upon seeing Steve, she tossed her hands up. "What the hell, Harrington?"

"I know," he said, leading Dustin into the back room.

Robin stalked behind them. "You were supposed to have been in an hour ago," she continued.

"I *know*," Steve said, opening the manager's desk and grabbing the flashlight. "I just gotta do one thing." Looking to Dustin, he said "Come on."

Dustin looked between Steve and Robin, then followed Steve out of the room and back into the mall. After walking past more people, Steve entered a side door and finally, stopped at the top of some dark stairs. Turning on the flashlight, he shone it at Dustin's face as he asked, "You ready?"

Dustin moved his head from the light's beam, saying "Why're you shining it in my face?"

Steve sighed, and began his trek down the stairs, with Dustin right behind him. When they got to the bottom, Steve shone the light to spots he remembered from last night, and there it was; the bloody handprint on the wall, and the trail that led towards a dark corner.

"Holy shit," Dustin whispered, taking it all in.

"That's not even the worst part," Steve said, leading Dustin to the hole. The two boys knelt down, with Steve pointing the beam into the open space. "It's about big enough for one of those dogs, right?" he asked.

"Demodogs," Dustin corrected.

"Whatever. My point is, we need to get Hopper down here, or *some*

one, so we can..."

The lights suddenly came on, blinding them for a second.

"Why are you down here in the dark?" Robin asked, standing at the bottom of the stairs, her hand on the light switch.

"Um..." Steve began.

She suddenly seemed to notice the trails of blood. "Whoa," she said. "What...what's going on?"

"We, uh," Dustin said. Then, looking to the boy next to him, asked "Steve?"

"Um..."

"And what is *that*?" she asked, pointing at the hole as she made her way over.

"Uh..." Dustin said, once more looking at Steve.

"Did you do this?" she asked Steve. Shaking her head, she said "Management's gonna *kill* you if they find out about this."

"I think management's the least of our problems," Steve finally said.

Robin looked confused. "What do you mean?"

"I didn't do this," Steve confirmed.

Dustin put up his hands. "Neither did I."

Robin looked confused. "Then where did all of this come from? Why is there blood on the wall; why...why is there a *hole* in the wall?"

Dustin and Steve exchanged glances. Dustin leaned close and whispered, "We may have to kill her."

Steve pushed the young teen off, and stepped forward. "Um..." he began, looking at Robin's shocked face, "We need to talk."

Hopper made his way up the stairs, hands up as the mohawked man behind him marched up behind him. Even though this guy currently held a gun to him, Jim knew without a doubt that if need be, he could reverse the situation. But he wanted to know where this was going.

“How’d you find us?” the man asked as they got to the second landing.

“I’m just trying to find my cousin,” Hopper lied as they began heading up to the third floor.

“Yeah, right. I know a cop when I see one,” the punk said. They got to the landing; there was a door on either side of them. Mohawk Man steered Jim towards the closer door, and reached around quickly, rapping on the door with the gun before returning his hand back to its original position in Jim’s back.

A moment later Hopper heard a shuffle of feet, then a woman’s voice on the other side of the door, asking “Axel, *please* tell me you got beer while you were out? Because I’m *dying* in...” She stopped when she opened the door. Jim was face to face with a blond woman with frizzy hair, who looked both scared and surprised to see him. “You’re not Axel,” she pointed out.

Behind him, the gun was shoved into his back again, signaling him to move. He obeyed, stepping inside. Once he was a few feet in, he heard the door close behind him.

“Who the hell is he?” the woman whispered.

“He’s a cop,” Axel said. “He was outside, scoping us out.”

“So you brought him *in* ?” the girl asked, worriedly looking first to Jim, then Axel.

“What was I supposed to do?” Axel asked. “Let him call his buddies?”

“Anything’s smarter than bringing him here,” another voice said, and Hopper turned, seeing another woman-this one with purple streaks in her hair-entering the room. Her eyes met Hopper’s, and for a second Jim thought he saw a flash of recognition. But if that’s what it was, it

vanished just as soon as it appeared.

“Who are you?” the woman asked.

“Jim,” he answered.

“Are you a policeman, Jim?” the girl asked.

“I am,” he said.

“I *knew* it,” Axel said.

“And what were you going to do next, Axel, hm?” the purple haired girl asked. Her eyes stayed locked with Jim’s, but she was talking to her accomplice. “Shoot him right here? Didn’t really think this out, did you?”

Axel said nothing, instead shaking his head as he put the pistol in his belt.

“Instead,” the girl continued, “You brought him into our...”

“Are you Kali?” Hopper interrupted, ready to get to the point.

She was surprised, but it only showed on her face for a second. “You’re Jane’s policeman, aren’t you?” she asked.

“Yeah,” Hopper answered. “Is it alright if I put my hands down now?”

Kali nodded, and Hopper proceeded to slowly lower his hands.

“What the hell’s going on?” the other girl asked.

“How does he know you?” Axel asked.

“It seems we have a mutual acquaintance,” Kali said. Nodding towards the room she’d come from, she said to Hopper “Let’s talk.”

Hopper gave another glance at Axel, then followed Kali into the next room.

Joyce, having just arrived home from running errands, was surprised when she came home to a quiet house. She'd seen Mike's bike outside, and knowing there were three teens in her house, she expected to enter into the group playing video games or watching a movie. Instead, she was greeted with dead silence.

"Hello?" she asked. "Anyone home?"

Still no answer, and she walked to the bedrooms to investigate. She smiled when she got to the first bedroom-Jonathan's-and saw Mike and Eleven asleep, the girl's head nestled on the boy's shoulder. She closed the door on them, and made her way down the hallway. When she got to Will's bedroom, she saw her son sitting on his bed, headphones on as he listened to his Walkman, sketching. She was about to knock on the door to get his attention, when she heard something-a staticky voice-coming from somewhere.

"... *ill? Mike?*" the voice asked.

Finally, Joyce knocked, causing Will to look up. He gave her a smile, then took off his headphones. "Hey, mom."

"Hey," she said. "I think someone's calling you."

A look of confusion flashed across his face, until he heard the voice, as well.

"My Supercomm," he said, putting down his drawing and getting off the bed. Stooping to his knees, he reached under his bed and moved his hand around, eventually coming out with the walkie, just as the voice returned.

"..*Will? Is Mike with you?* "

Will pushed down the button to talk. "Lucas? It's me. What's going on? Over."

"Is Mike there? Over."

"Yeah, he's here. What's wrong? Over."

"Dustin. He said he needs us, possible code red. Over."

Will nodded. "Okay. I'll get Mike, we'll meet you guys. Where at? Over."

"Starcourt. See you there in thirty. Over and out."

Will tossed his walkie onto his bed.

"What's a possible code red?" Joyce asked as Will put on his shoes.

"I don't know," Will said. "Could be a Demogorgon, could be *Scoops Ahoy* is out of ice cream. You never know with Dustin."

"Wait," Joyce said, putting up a hand to stop Will. "You're not going down there if there might be a...demo thing."

"Mom, I'll be fine," Will said. "Dustin probably saw a stray dog and thought it was Dart or something. I mean...it's the *mall*. Nothing bad's going to happen."

Joyce bit her lip, debating. On one hand she wanted to trust Will. On the other, Hopper wasn't in town, and she was unsure of how things could turn out if there *were* a...demo thing at Starcourt.

"Fine," she finally said. "But if you see something... *anything* ...get out of there right away, understand?"

Will nodded.

Joyce then scooped up his walkie. "And take this."

Will grinned, and stuffed his Supercomm into his backpack. "Alright, Mom." Zipping it shut, he said "Let me go get Mike and I'll be on my way."

Again, Joyce felt herself at a crossroads. There was a strength in numbers, and Mike going with Will would help to alleviate some of her worries. However, El hadn't really slept last night, and if Mike left, Joyce was afraid the girl could be unwell again.

"He's asleep," she told Will. "When he wakes up, I'll tell him where you are, alright?"

Will seemed a little surprised, but nodded his head. "Alright. I'll see you in a little bit."

Joyce watched him walk down the hallway, glancing at Jonathan's room as he passed it.

"Be careful," Joyce called after him.

"I will," he called back, going out the front door.

Joyce watched him go, unable to shake the bad feeling she felt.

At Starcourt, Steve stood, his arms folded, as he watched his coworker Robin nervously pace, taking in everything she'd just heard. Steve had given her an abridged version of what was going on. He'd left out the part about an alternate universe and a local telekinetic teenage girl, but told her a brief history of the now closed Hawkins National Laboratory.

Steve felt Dustin's presence next to him, as the curly haired boy returned from calling his friends. They both watched Robin as she finished pacing and turn to them both.

"Are you *serious*?" she asked.

"Why would we make this up?" Dustin asked.

"I'm not talking to you, little one, I'm talking to *him*," she said, eyes going from Dustin to Steve.

Steve pointed at Dustin. "What he said; why would we make this up?"

"I don't know," she answered, throwing up her hands. "Maybe to hide the fact that you're up to some weird shit in this basement?"

Dustin leaned close again. "I told you, we have to silence her."

"Will you shut up with that?" Steve said, bumping Dustin away. "Look, Robin," he said, "I know this all sounds weird and made up,

but believe me, it's not. If you'd seen even *half* of the shit we have in the last two years, you'd be singing a different tune. Now if you want to call the cops, you can; please, be my guest. But the only one who can really help us isn't available at the moment. So it's up to us."

Robin shook her head. "So you and a bunch of children are going to get to the bottom of this?"

"Teenagers," Dustin corrected.

"And they're more resourceful than you think," Steve said. "They're, like, two for two at this."

Robin shook her head once more. "I'm going back to work. What should I tell Barry? He probably saw you come in."

"Damn," Steve said, running a hand through his hair. "Cover for me for, like, ten minutes, okay?"

"Fine," Robin answered. Glancing once more at the hole, she left them behind as she ascended the stairs.

"Do you trust her?" Dustin asked when her feet had disappeared.

"I don't really have a choice," Steve responded. "When're you friends getting here?"

Dustin shrugged. "I don't know. Fifteen minutes, maybe?"

Steve nodded. "Alright. Get 'em to meet you at *Scoops* . And *don't* come down here unless I'm with you, you got it?"

"Yeah, fine," Dustin said, picking up his backpack and putting it on. "I'd be more worried about your girlfriend."

"She's not my girlfriend," Steve said as the two headed towards the stairs. "But I think we can trust her."

Hopper followed Kali into the room she'd emerged from, shutting the door behind him. She turned to face him, putting her hands in her pockets as she looked him over.

Finally she spoke, saying "So she found me."

Hopper raised an eyebrow. "What do you mean?"

"Jane. I...sensed her, yesterday."

"Oh. Well, yeah, she found you."

Kali shook her head as she smiled. "She's becoming more impressive each day."

"That she is," Jim said, shifting from one foot to another.

"She told me all about you, you know."

"She did, did she?" Hopper asked. He was more than ready to be out of this hellhole.

"Oh, yes. How you were imprisoning her, keeping her locked away in some cabin."

"Okay..."

"How you lied to her? About her name, about her mother..."

Hopper rubbed his eyes, tired.

"How could you do that?"

He opened his eyes at the familiar voice, and saw Eleven standing in front of him, distraught. "El?" he asked.

"Why did you lie to me?" she asked, eyes tearing up.

Hopper closed his eyes, and let out a breath. "Get out of my head," he whispered.

“Why wouldn’t you tell me who I was?” the girl asked.

“You’re not real,” Hopper said. Looking at Kali, he demanded “ *Stop it* .”

Kali smiled, and Eleven vanished into thin air.

Hopper let out another breath, then returned his gaze to the young woman. “She told me about you, too, did you know that? About what you can do, and your sick little revenge thing you’ve got going on. How you tried to get a thirteen-year-old girl to kill a man, while his kids hid, crying in the next room.”

“If I remember correctly, Jane has killed before, hasn’t she?” Kali asked.

Hopper sighed, not wanting to get into this. Finally, he spoke. “Listen. I don’t want to be here just as much as you don’t want me here, but El needs your help.”

Kali looked confused. “What do you mean?”

“She’s been having these...ailments. Nosebleeds when she’s not using her powers. She’s passed out a couple of times.”

Kali looked genuinely concerned.

“And it’s not like we can take her to a doctor.”

“So she thought that I could help,” Kali guessed.

“Can you? Did this ever happen to you?”

“I can’t say that it has,” she answered. “How long has it been happening?”

“A few days now.”

Kali opened her mouth to speak, but then changed her mind, shaking her head instead.

“Look,” Hopper said. “For some reason she thinks you can help her.

She trusts you. Now I need to know whether or not you can do something for her. Because if something's wrong with her-like, seriously wrong-then I need to find someone who can."

Kali nodded, wheels turning in her head. "I don't...there isn't anything *I* can do," she said.

Hopper sighed, thinking to himself *So this trip was a total waste of time* .

"But," Kali continued, "There might be someone else who can."

Hopper frowned. "Who?"

Kali sighed, and searched for something. A second later she found it-a piece of paper-and began writing something down. "The man that Jane almost killed; he worked there. He worked at the lab." She handed Jim the paper. "He may know something. Or, if not...he might know someone who does."

Looking at the paper, Hopper read the name-

Ray Carroll

Chicago, Illinois

He stuffed it into his pocket, and muttered a half-hearted "Thanks."

As he turned to leave, Kali said "I hope you find the answers you're looking for."

Jim smirked. "Me, too."

As he turned the knob, she added "And I hope Jane is alright."

Hopper started to say something, but he could tell both from her voice and from the look in her eyes that she meant it. So, he nodded, saying "I do, too."

And with that, he opened the door and left.

At Starcourt, Dustin sat in a booth at *Scoops* , waiting for his friends and growing more impatient as the seconds ticked by. Glancing at the counter, he saw Steve talking quietly to the girl, Robin, as the two stood behind the ice cream counter. Dustin was still unsure about her, but Steve seemed to think she could keep a secret.

“There he is,” he heard. Glancing up, he saw Lucas and Max sitting down, joining him at the booth.

“What took you guys?” Dustin asked. “I called you, like, a half-hour ago.”

“I was in the shower,” Max said.

“And it was more like twenty minutes,” Lucas said. “Anyway, what’s going on?”

But instead of answering, Dustin shook his head. “I’m gonna wait until Will and Mike get here.”

“Any word on El?” Max asked.

“No. But I’m sure Mike will know something,” Lucas answered.

A minute later Will walked in, scooting into the booth next to Dustin. “Hey, guys.”

“Where’s Mike?” Dustin asked.

“He’s not coming,” Will answered.

“What? Why the hell not?”

“He’s sleeping. Taking care of El.”

“How’s she doing?” Max asked.

“Okay, I guess.”

“ Now will you tell us?” Lucas asked Dustin.

Dustin stole another glance at Steve, who was busy helping a customer. “Guys, you’re not gonna be *lieve* what we saw.”

“We?”

“Steve and me.” Dustin spent the next few minutes telling his friends about Steve waking him up this morning, then the two rooting around in the mall’s basement.

When his story was finished, his three friends all wore similar shocked faces.

“So it might be a....” Lucas lowered his voice. “Demogorgon?”

“Or a Demodog,” Dustin whispered back.

“Or just a regular dog,” Max said. “Those things died, remember?”

“Then how do you explain the blood?”

“I don’t know...maybe a dog dragged in a raccoon and butchered him down there or something.”

“Yeah, there’s no Mind Flayer around,” Will added. “It doesn’t make sense.”

“I’m telling you, it isn’t a dog,” Dustin said.

“How do you know? You haven’t even *seen* it,” Lucas retorted.

Dustin shook his head. “I just know, okay? And once you guys see it, you’ll believe it, too.”

Now Will shook his head. “We should wait until Hopper gets back.”

“Or until El’s better,” Max suggested.

“When’s he getting back?” Lucas asked about the police chief.

“And how long until El gets better?” Dustin asked, sounding slightly annoyed.

"That's kind of harsh," Max said, making a face.

Dustin sighed. "Of course I want her to feel better, but we don't know how much time we have, or how many of these things there are. Time is of the essence."

"Let's just go look," Lucas said, beginning to stand.

"No," Dustin said, pulling his friend back down. "I promised Steve."

"You promised Steve?"

"Yes. I told him we wouldn't go down there without him, so...yeah."

"Okay, well, *I* didn't promise him anything," Lucas said, getting up again.

"Sit your ass down, Sinclair," Steve said, making his way to the table. "You aren't going anywhere." Looking at Dustin, he asked "You told them?"

"Yeah."

"Okay, then," Steve said, pulling up a chair. "What do we do next?"

**

Joyce had just settled on the couch, one of her favorite movies playing, when the phone began to ring.

"Of course," she muttered, rushing to answer it before it woke El and Mike. Picking up the receiver, she asked "Hello?"

"Hey, Joyce," came Hopper's voice.

"Hop," she breathed into the phone. "Where have you been? I've been waiting on you to call."

"Yeah, I know. I've been busy."

He sounded tired, and Joyce frowned, worried. "Everything okay?"

"Yeah, but it's gonna take a little bit longer to do what I need to do."

"The girl, El's sister or whatever. She wasn't much help?"

"Not the help I needed." He sighed. "How's she doing?"

Joyce looked towards the bedroom. "She's okay. We had a small scare last night, but she's fine. She's sleeping now."

Hopper chuckled. "You actually got her to sit still and sleep?"

"Well not *me*, exactly. Mike might've had something to do with it."

"Oh, Jesus." Another sigh, then he said, "Look, I've got to go to Chicago."

"Why?"

"Kali couldn't help; but she gave me the name of someone who might. So it'll probably be another day before I'm back."

"Okay," Joyce said, but she didn't like the sound of this. "Just...let me go wake up El..."

"No," Hopper said before she could get off the phone. "Don't wake her. I'll call again when I get to Chicago. Take care of her, Joyce."

"You take care of yourself, Hop," she said back. "And Hop?"

"Yeah?"

A pause, then she said "Hurry back."

Hopper hung up the payphone, and checked the time; fifteen minutes until his train left. He thought about the trip ahead of him, as well as the phone call he'd made minutes before calling Joyce.

When he'd left Kali's apartment, Hopper made a phone call to someone else he knew in Illinois, Murray Bauman, to get the address

of Ray Carroll. It'd taken some moaning and groaning, but upon the next phone call the bearded man had turned up an address, and would meet him at the train station in Chicago. Hopper was hoping this whole thing would be done by this time tomorrow, but he was worried. Worried that this Ray guy wouldn't be any help; worried that El would get worse; worried that Murray's information would be wrong.

But what worried him the most-though it had to be unlikely-was that all of this would lead to the Upside Down again. Or, perhaps worse, to Martin Brenner.

But those both seemed unlikely; the Gate was closed, and Brenner was dead.

So, hoping for the best, Hopper made his way to his train.

Notes for the Chapter:

Thanks for the kudos, subscriptions, and comments. I may not respond, but I do read them and it makes my day when I see I got a comment or kudos. I will try not to wait 2 months before the next chapter, but don't quote me :)

8. El's Our Mage

Hours ago-

"Hi, you have reached the residence of Murray Bauman. Mom, if this is you again, call me back at 5, got it, Mom? 5. If this is anyone else, I don't know how you got this number, but lose it! Thank you and good day."

Hopper shook his head as he held the receiver in his hand. Once the beep of the answering machine came, he spoke, saying "Murray, it's Jim Hopper. Look, I need your help, okay? It's about..."

*There was a sound on the other end, as the phone was picked up off it's cradle. "Hopper?" came a familiar voice. "Hawkins Chief of Police *Jim* Hopper?"*

"Murray?"

"How'd you get this number?"

Jim rubbed his face. "Look, Murray, I don't have time for this, okay? I need to..."

"How did you get this number?"

Hopper sighed. "You gave me your card, last year when you were in town, remember? How the hell else you think I got it?"

It was silent on the other end, and for a second Hopper thought they'd been disconnected. But then Murray returned, saying "Why are you calling?"

"I'm coming to Chicago," Hopper answered. "And I need your help."

*"My *help*?" Jim heard somewhat-manic laughing before Murray came back. "You lied, right to my face, about all of the things that go bump in the night in Hawkins last year. Almost drove me mad, Jim!"*

Almost? Hopper thought.

*"And now you call me, completely out of the blue, saying you need my help. Well you know what, Jim? You don't *get* my help."*

"Murray..."

*"Silence! You have not earned the *right* to get my help, Jim Hopper, and I will sit here with a smile on my face, knowing that somewhere out there *you* need *me*. Ha!"*

Hopper groaned. "Are you done?"

*"No. *Now* I'm done." And with a click, the line went dead.*

Jim sighed before putting more coins into the payphone. He redialed the number, and listened to it ring a few times before the message replayed.

"Murray," he spoke into the phone, "Listen. You can bitch and moan at me, but I really need your help, alright? Please." He paused, hoping Murray—who was no doubt listening—could hear the desperation in his voice. When there was no response, he added "Look, just...I need to get in touch with someone that used to work at Hawkins Lab. He lives in Chicago, and..."

There was a click, and Murray picked up the phone. "Alright, Jim. You've got two minutes."

With a jump, El awoke from her nap. At first she didn't know where she was, but as the dark haired boy next to her stirred, the past 24 hours began flooding back to her: the nosebleeds, the Byers, Mike, and Hopper.

Hopper.

Where was he? Had he called? How long had she slept? A glance at the window told her the sun was still in the sky, if not a little lower than before.

"El?" Mike asked, sitting up. Rubbing sleep out of his eye, he asked "What's wrong?"

"It's...Hop," she told him.

"Is he hurt?"

"No," she said, shaking her head to face him. "I just...want to know if he's okay."

Looking at her face, Mike looked worried. "El, have you been using your powers to find Hopper?"

"No," she said, shaking her head.

"Because your...your nose is bleeding again," he said, pointing.

El's eyes widened, and she quickly grabbed a tissue from the bedside box, and dabbed at her nose with it. She pulled the tissue away, but her nose continued to bleed. Mike sat all the way up, grabbing a handful of tissues and bringing them to her nose. El took them from him, and Mike watched her, his worry turning over to concern. "I'm going to get Mrs. Byers," he said, climbing out of bed and heading towards the door.

"Mike, no!" El called. He turned, and saw her outstretched hand, beckoning him back. She wore a frown on her face, no doubt from the whole situation.

"I don't want to keep this from Mrs. Byers," he told her, coming back to the bed. "I don't want to lie like we did with Hopper."

El shook her head. "Not a lie. We just...didn't tell."

Mike sighed. El moved the tissues from her nose, and looked at the results; the bleeding seemed to have stopped.

Mike shook his head. "El..."

"Please," she pleaded. "I don't want her to worry. Next time...we tell."

"You promise?"

"Promise."

Mike wasn't too pleased, but decided to go along with it (for now at least). El tossed the tissues into the nearby trash.

"I'll go get a washcloth," Mike said, standing. "For your nose."

El nodded as Mike left the room. Her mind drifted to what'd happened a few minutes ago.

When she'd called for Mike to stop, she'd gone to use her powers to close the door before he could leave the room.

But nothing happened.

No door close, no extra nosebleed; *nothing* .

She wasn't sure what that meant, yet. Was something wrong with her powers? Did the nosebleeds and her exhaustion have something to do with it?

Mike returned, holding a damp washcloth. "Will's gone," he commented as he sat across from her on the bed. "I wonder where he went?"

El closed her eyes as he began wiping above her upper lip. She, too, wondered where Will had gone off too.

At Starcourt, the assembled group of Dustin, Lucas, Max, Will, and Steve made their way through the double doors that led down to the mall's basement. After a brief debate about what to do, the newcomers had decided that they needed to see it for themselves.

"I'm telling you, there's nothing down there to see," Steve said as they arrived at the steps.

"Then why're you and Dustin being so paranoid," Max retorted.

Steve sighed and began to go down the steps. He paused, however, when the doors they'd just come from opened, and Robin joined their group.

“Why are you here?” Steve asked her.

She shrugged. “If you die, Barry’s gonna make me work a double, so...”

Steve couldn’t help it; he grinned.

Dustin led the way downstairs, with the party following his footsteps. When they entered the basement, the newcomers gasped at seeing the blood on the walls.

“Still think this was just a dog?” Dustin asked his friends.

“We have to tell someone,” Lucas said.

“Like who? Hopper’s gone.”

“I don’t know. The army? The government? The President?”

“I thought you said they could handle it,” Robin mentioned to Steve.

“It’s still early, give it some time,” he said.

“Guys?” It was Max’s voice, from the corner of the room. “Come here.”

The group made their way to her position. She was stooped over, peering into the hole in the wall. “Is this where it came from?” she asked Dustin and Steve.

Dustin shrugged. “Probably.”

“Gimme your flashlight,” Lucas said, joining her on the floor as he took the light from Dustin. He shone the beam inside the hole, as Will and Dustin joined him on the floor.

“See anything?” Robin asked.

“No,” Dustin answered. “It’s just...dark.”

“Where do you think it leads to?” Will asked.

“What’s on the other side of this wall?” Dustin asked, looking up at

Steve.

The older boy shrugged. "I don't know. Hot Dog on a Stick?"

"Out *side* , Steve," he clarified.

"It's the back of the mall," Robin answered. "There's the docks for delivery trucks, and then it just leads into a field."

"Okay, then, let's go," Max said, standing.

"Excuse me?" Robin looked skeptical.

"This has got to lead somewhere, right?" Lucas said, getting up and standing next to his girlfriend. "Let's find it."

"Okay," Robin said, "So you want to find where a hole that may house some monster that did *this* ," she said, motioning around them "Leads, and do...what, exactly?"

"We're investigating," Dustin said. "Haven't you ever heard of scientific curiosity?"

"Haven't you ever heard of curiosity killing the cat?" she asked.

"I hate to side with Robin here, but she's got a point," Steve said, speaking up. "I mean...what're you gonna do if that thing is in there? El's not here to save you this time."

Dustin looked at Steve with a hopeful look. "You still got that bat?"

Steve sighed as Robin frowned. "What bat?" she asked.

El's upper lip free of blood, Mike and Eleven walked into the kitchen. Mike figured maybe some food (Eggo's, probably) would get her strength back up.

Joyce Byers, sitting on the couch, looked over her shoulder as the two walked past her. "You're up," she said.

"Yes," El responded, taking a seat at the table.

"Is it alright if I make El some waffles?" Mike asked.

"Sure, sure," Joyce said, standing. Walking over to El, she asked "How're you feeling?"

"Okay," she answered, shrugging her shoulders. She felt bad about keeping the truth from Joyce, but she didn't want the woman she'd come to see as a near-mother worry unnecessarily. "Did Hop call?"

Joyce sighed, but nodded her head.

"Why didn't you wake me?" El asked, hurt showing on her face.

"He wanted you to keep sleeping," she said. "Did it help? The rest?"

El nodded before asking "Is he...okay?"

"He's fine, sweetie," Joyce answered. "It's just taking him a lot longer than he thought."

"Did he find Kali?"

"He did, but he told me she wasn't much help. He was heading to Chicago when he called."

"What's in Chicago?" Eleven asked quietly.

"Someone who can help."

Eleven nodded, still worried. Behind her, the toaster popped, and Mike began putting her plate together.

"I'll give you two some space," Joyce said. "Call me if you need me." She walked down the hallway.

Mike placed a plate of three waffles in front of Eleven. She seemed to perk up a bit at the sight of her favorite meal, and picked up the fork he offered her.

"I'm sure Hopper's fine," Mike said, taking a seat and noticing El's worried look.

"Then why is he in Chicago?" she asked. "And why couldn't Kali

help?”

Mike shrugged. “Beats me.”

El chewed quietly, her mind running over what she could do. Mike eyed her curiously. “What’s wrong?”

She thought for a moment, trying to put her feelings into the right words. “I don’t like this.”

“You don’t like what? Are the Eggo’s bad?”

“No. I don’t like...waiting.”

“Oh.”

“I should be with Hopper. Helping.”

Mike shook his head. “El, you’re still recharging.”

She sighed. She considered, once she’d eaten, using her powers to locate her dad. But she frowned, remembering what happened with the door in Jonathan’s room. *Were her powers gone, or was it just that she was too weak to use them?*

“Besides,” Mike continued, “He’d want to make sure you get better. He’s worried about you.” Mike shrugged. “So am I.”

El smiled. “Thank you.”

He nodded. “What kind of boyfriend would I be if...” He paused, realizing his wording.

El frowned, confused. “Mike? What’s wrong?”

“Nothing,” he said. “It’s just...I never really asked you to be my girlfriend.”

“Oh.”

“See...a girlfriend is...”

“Mike,” she said, smiling and putting her hand on top of his. “I know

what a girlfriend is.”

“You do?”

“Yes,” she said. “Max told me. But...”

“Yeah?”

“I already thought we were boyfriend and girlfriend.” She thought about all of the times Max had referred to Mike as her boyfriend, and all the times Hopper had jokingly called Mike that as well.

“You did?” He couldn’t help but smile at her.

“Yes,” she replied, nodding. “We’re not?”

“We can be,” he said. “If...if that’s okay with you.”

Eleven was confused; why wouldn’t it be okay with her? She already saw Mike as her boyfriend, her best friend, and the most important person in the world to her. In what universe would it *not* be okay?

“Yes,” she said, leaning over and pressing her lips to his.

Mike kissed her back, glad that they’d finally gotten it out of the way.

Meanwhile at Starcourt, the spiked bat had been retrieved from the trunk of Steve’s car, and the assembled crew had spread out in an attempt to trap whatever monster lay within the walls. Steve had been able to talk his boss into letting he and Robin have their lunch break at the same time. At the moment, Steve (bat in hand), Dustin, and Will were searching outside of the mall for any tunnels. Inside, in the basement, were Lucas (with his wrist rocket), Max, and Robin, who was armed with a broken clothing stand rack.

Holding the walkie, Max pressed a button, asking “Do you guys see anything yet?”

“It’s literally been two minutes since you last asked,” Dustin responded. “And besides, don’t you think we would’ve said

something if we had?"

"Okay, jeez. You don't have to bite my head off," Max said back before clicking off.

"So you've really fought one of these things before?" Robin asked the two teens, as she paced around in the basement.

"Fought it? Not exactly," Max answered.

"I have," Lucas spoke.

"Oh, yeah? How'd it go?"

He shrugged. "I'm still here, aren't I?"

"Yeah, thanks to El," Max muttered.

"Who's El?" Robin asked.

Max and Lucas shared a look. "She's...a friend," Lucas finally said.

"Your friend took on one of these by herself?"

"Uh...no?"

"Come on," Robin said. "Steve already told me about the lab, and all the weird shit that was going on there, so...so this friend of yours, she fought one of these things with her bare hands or something?"

"Not exactly," Lucas said.

"Well, technically she *does* use her hands," Max responded.

Robin started to say something else, but the walkie suddenly came to life. "Max? Lucas? Are you there?" came Dustin's voice.

"We're here," Max said, thankful for the save.

"We think we found something."

Outside, Steve, Dustin, and Will had made it about a hundred yards from the mall before they found something of interest.

“Well, what is it?” Max’s voice asked through the walkie.

Dustin was stooped over, looking at his discovery. “It’s...I think it’s a dead possum.”

“Are you serious?” Max’s voice asked.

“Hold on, I’m checking,” Dustin said. Picking up a stick, he poked at the rodent. When it didn’t move, he said “Yeah, it’s dead.”

“I told you it was nothing,” Will complained, standing over Dustin.

“We had to be sure,” Dustin shot back as he stood up.

“No, *you* had to be sure,” Will said. “Steve and I swore it was nothing. Right, Steve?”

Will looked to his left, where the older boy had been a moment ago. “Steve?”

“Where’d he go?” Dustin asked.

“Over here, dipshits,” Steve called, a few feet away. Dustin and Will headed towards him. “I think I got something.”

“Is it something real?” Will asked. “Because I don’t...” He paused near Steve as he looked at what was in front of him. Dustin stopped, too. After a gulp, he brought the walkie to his mouth.

“Uh...Max? Lucas?”

There was a crackle on the walkie before Lucas responded. “What now, Dustin?”

“It’s definitely something this time.”

Steve, Dustin, and Will stood at the edge of a clearing, and were looking at what appeared to be at least twenty to thirty dead rodents and a handful of small house pets-dogs and cats, mostly. Each animal

looked as if it'd been devoured, with whatever remained left behind to rot.

"I think I'm gonna be sick," Will said, turning away.

"Holy shit," Dustin murmured.

"Dustin," came Lucas's voice. "What'd you find? What is it?"

"It's a freaking graveyard," Dustin answered into the walkie.

"What?"

Looking to Steve, Dustin asked, "Now what?"

Steve shook his head. "I don't know. But...the hole, it's gotta be around here somewhere, right?"

Dustin and Steve looked around them, while in the bushes nearby they heard Will throwing up. "Is he gonna be okay?" Steve asked Dustin.

"He'll be fine," the boy answered. "Look!" Steve followed where Dustin was pointing, and saw it: a hole in the earth, just big enough for an animal-a demodog-type animal, to be exact-to be able to fit through.

"Stay back," Steve said, gripping the bat he'd been carrying at his side tighter.

"No way," Dustin said. "If you die, I die."

Steve shook his head. "Whatever, man," he muttered as the boys crept closer.

When they arrived at the hole, Steve raised the bat, ready to strike. However, nothing jumped out; nothing evil lurked nearby. It was, at the moment, just a hole.

"Steve, what's going on?" Robin's voice asked through the walkie. "Steve?"

Ignoring her, Steve bent over, peering into the hole in the dirt.

“Look, dingus,” came his coworker’s voice, “We’ve got to get back soon, so if you don’t...”

Steve grabbed the walkie from Dustin’s hand. “Yeah, I’m here; calm down. We found the hole into the building.”

There was a shuffling noise, as the walkie was moved below them. Lucas came on, asking “Do you see it? The monster thing?”

“You think we’d be talking to you if we did?” Dustin asked, as he took the walkie back. Putting the Supercomm down, he put his mouth to the hole, and called “Helloooooo!”

After Steve gave him a look, Dustin stood up. Grabbing the walkie, he asked “Did you hear me?”

“No,” Lucas said. “What’d you say?”

“I said hello.”

“Do it again.”

Dustin proceeded to bend over, but Steve grabbed the walkie from him. “Look, it doesn’t matter if you heard him or not. We need a plan.”

“Why don’t we just close it up?” Will asked as he made his way over. “Bury it?”

“That’s not going to stop it,” Dustin said. “It could just dig back in.”

“Well, what do you suggest, then?” Will asked.

Dustin shrugged.

“Hey, dingus,” came Robin’s voice over the walkie. “Lunchtime is over.”

“Shit,” Steve said. “I’ll be right there.” Turning to Dustin, he said “You go home.”

“But we...”

“Are going home,” Steve finished. “You’re not dying unless I kill you, Henderson. If any of you little shitheads come out here without me, your ass is grass, understand? Now get out of here.”

Dustin sighed, reluctantly turning away from the hole.

“You too, Byers, let’s go,” Steve told Will. Will followed Dustin, and the three of them made their way back to the mall.

Back at the Byers home, Eleven sat on Jonathan’s bed, focusing her attention on a Coke can at the end of the bed. Her arm out, she was attempting to crumple it or, at the least, summon it to her.

She’d been at it for five minutes, ever since Mike had left to go call his mom. And so far all she’d gotten in return was a headache and a bruised ego.

Why weren’t they working? she thought to herself. *What’s happening to me?*

She wondered what use she could be without her powers. One thing she loved about being out in Hawkins as opposed to being in the lab was that other people didn’t define her by her abilities.

But, try as she may, a part of *her* still did. She’d had them for her whole life; they’d always been a part of her. If they were indeed gone, what use was she to anyone? Sure, there was no threat at the moment, but what if something happened?

Letting out a sigh, she dropped her hand, defeated.

“Hey,” she heard Mike say as he entered the room. “My mom said it’s fine if I sleep over.” Shrugging, he said “She said Jonathan is sleeping on the couch in the basement, but I doubt he’s actually, you know, *sleep ing* there.”

“Cool,” El offered. “Still no word from Will? Or anyone else?”

“No,” he answered, shaking his head. “Mrs. Byers said they went to the mall.”

Eleven nodded, glancing at the Coke can.

“What’s wrong?” Mike asked.

El sighed. “I...”

They heard the front door open, and Mrs. Byers call “Will! Where have you been, it’s almost dinner time.”

“Will’s back,” Mike said, standing. “I’ll be right back.” And with that, he dashed out of the room.

Once her boyfriend stepped out of the room, El turned her attention back to the Coke can. Extending her hand, she focused everything in her to get it to move, to do *some* thing.

Her head was pounding, and she was about to give up, when the familiar taste of blood hit her upper lip and the can first shook, then slowly crumpled up. Lowering her hand, El let out an exhausted (though relieved) breath.

It wasn’t supposed to be that hard , she thought to herself. And her head was killing her. She reached next to her and picked up a tissue, wiping at her nose. Her ears itched, and she went to scratch; but when she pulled her hand away, was surprised at the blood there, too. Grabbing another ball of tissues, she wiped her ears before looking at the crimson tissues in her hand.

Strange .

Her ears only bled when she fully exerted her powers; times such as closing the gate and her first time killing those men in the lab. This was just crushing a soda can; something she’d done a dozen or so times. Why would her ears bleed?

Outside the door, she heard Will and Mike’s voices coming closer, so she quickly tossed the tissues into the trash bin. When the two boys came into the room, she had just sat up on the bed.

“Hey, El,” Will said. “How’re you feeling?”

She shrugged her shoulders, not sure yet how to answer that. “Where have you been?” she asked, curious.

“Nowhere,” Will answered, shrugging as well. “Just the mall.”

Eleven caught a glance pass between Will and Mike. “What is it?”

Will and Mike looked at each other once more, before Will said “Dustin thinks...he found something at Starcourt.”

“Found something?” El asked, sitting up straighter. “Like what?”

“Will....” Mike began.

“Like...maybe a demodog,” Will said.

El paused. “Like...like Dart?”

“Yeah.”

“But there wasn’t one there,” Mike said to El. “They didn’t see anything; Dustin could be wrong.”

“There was blood all over the basement, Mike,” Will argued.

“Blood?” El asked.

“Yeah. The basement, there was blood on the wall.”

Eleven didn’t say anything, recalling the nightmare she’d had weeks ago; waking up back in the lab with blood everywhere. Could they be related?

“And there were dead animals outside,” Will continued, “And a hole...”

“A hole?”

Will nodded. “A hole outside. We think it goes into the mall.”

“It could be nothing, El,” Mike offered.

“Or it could be something, Mike,” Will said. “You didn’t see all the dead animals.”

“Dead animals?” El asked.

Will explained the graveyard that he, Dustin, and Steve had run into outside.

“This thing could be miles away now, whatever it is,” Mike said.

“What if it’s not?” El asked, surprising the boys.

“What do you mean?” Mike asked.

“What if it comes back?”

“El,” Mike started, “You don’t always have to be the one to stop these things.”

“Who else can?” she asked.

“Hopper,” Will offered.

But Eleven shook her head. “He’s...busy.” Looking at Mike, she said “We can do this. *I* can do this.”

“But you’re sick. Your powers...”

“Are fine,” El said, glancing at the tissue box and, with a flick of her hand, summoned it into her hand. “See?”

Mike sighed, and began to say something when Mrs. Byers called to tell them dinner was ready. Will looked between Mike and El, and said “I’ll see you guys out there.”

Once he left the room, Mike walked to the bed. “You don’t have to do this,” he told El.

“I know,” she said, crawling out of bed. “*I want* to.”

Mike huffed, but helped her get out of bed and standing. “I’m going to wash my hands,” he said. “I’ll see you at the table.”

El gave him a smile as he turned and left the room. As he turned, a sense of dizziness came over her, and she grabbed the bed for support. When she felt somewhat normal again, she wiped away the blood under her nose and went to join the Byers for dinner.

After dinner, the group settled down and everyone got ready for bed. Despite his wishes, Mike was unable to sleep in the same room with Eleven; instead, he dragged his sleeping bag into Will's room.

"She's fine," Will told his friend when the lights had gone off. When Mike didn't respond right away, Will glanced over towards where his friend was resting. "Mike?"

In the dark, Mike quietly asked "Why'd you tell her about the stuff at the mall?"

Surprised, Will answered "Because we have to *do* something, Mike."

Mike shook his head. "You mean *El* has to do something."

"You know what I mean," Will said. "She's done it before."

"But she's sick," Mike said, sitting up. "Everyone wants to take her for granted and thinks she can fight these fights for us, but I don't think she can this time."

"You saw her with the tissue box, right? She seemed okay to me."

Huffing, Mike lay back down. "I still don't like it."

Will sighed. "Well, maybe it's like you said, and this thing is gone. Think of El as, like...a precaution."

The talk between the two eventually died down, and soon after Will was asleep. Mike listened to his friend snore softly as he thought about the girl in the room down the hall. As tempted as he'd been, he hadn't told Mrs. Byers what the group was planning tomorrow. The party had a lot of rules, and one of the rules was to not rat out a friend.

Still, he didn't like this. Despite what she said, Mike knew that El wasn't at a hundred percent. *This would be so much easier* , he thought, *if Hopper were here. He wouldn't let Eleven go through with this*

.

He knew Eleven wanted to help; to be honest, that was one of the things he loved about her (*there's that word again*). But she wasn't ready yet. And, unfortunately, he knew she was too stubborn to admit it.

So he'd try his best to be supportive tomorrow. But if push came to shove, he'd put a stop to it if he had to.

**

Now arriving in Chicago....

The train jerked, causing Hopper to wake up. Blinking himself awake, he looked around the cabin, and saw the other passengers gathering their things. *Finally* , he thought to himself. With a quick glance at his watch, he saw it was a little past 8 in the morning. The train ride from Boston seemed like it took forever. And the longer he was away from Eleven, the more he worried about her. Not getting to talk to her when he'd called hours ago hurt, but he was glad to hear she'd been resting. Hopefully she wouldn't try anything stupid until he got back. Besides, he'd make sure to find a few minutes in Chicago to call again.

He'd had a feeling all along that Kali wasn't going to be much help; then again, who knew if this new guy, this Ray Carroll, would be any help, either. Still, it was a chance. And for El, he'd do whatever it took.

Even if that meant relying on Murray Bauman.

Jim had been reluctant to call the reporter, but the fact that Murray lived in Illinois together with his investigative skills was too much to pass. Hopefully it'd be over soon.

When the train finally came to a stop, Hopper got off along with

everyone else. He passed people hugging and reuniting with relatives, and glanced out at the parking lot. He saw Murray parked in the back, sitting behind the wheel of his dirty old van.

“I wasn’t a hundred percent you’d show,” Hopper said as he climbed into the passenger seat.

“What can I say, Jim,” Murraray said. “You piqued my curiosity.” He pushed over one of the two coffees that sat on the dashboard.

Hopper happily accepted it, taking a sip of the warm liquid. “So? You find him?”

“Really, Jim?” Murray asked. “Was there ever any doubt I would?”

Hopper shrugged, taking another sip of the coffee as Murray reached into the back, pulling his hand back with a manilla folder. Hopper took it, opening it and seeing information about this man, Ray Carroll. Skimming over the information, he glanced at the address. “How far is this?”

“Not far,” Murray answered, starting the van.

“Then let’s go.”

The two men were on their way, and a half an hour later they arrived at an apartment building. Murray parked his van, before following Hopper out of the car.

“Whoa, whoa,” Jim said, looking at Murray. “Where do you think you’re going?”

Murray scoffed. “You really think I’m going to sit out here while you go and talk to this guy? I did all the legwork, Jim, and I plan to see the return on my efforts.”

Hopper shook his head. “Whatever.”

They made their way up a flight of stairs and walked down a hallway until they stopped in front of a door. Hopper knocked.

At first there was no response, just the sounds of dogs barking nearby and cars passing on the street. Looking at Murray, Hopper asked “You think he moved?”

“If he’d have moved, Jim, I’d know about it,” Murray responded before knocking on the door himself.

Hopper started to say something, when suddenly a voice on the other side answered, “Who are you?”

Hopper paused before responding, saying “I’m Chief Jim Hopper, Hawkins PD. This is Murray Bauman, he’s a...a reporter.”

“In *vestigator* ,” Murray corrected.

“Yeah,” Hopper said. “Look, I just wanna talk.”

The door cracked open, and Hopper was looking back at the face of the man in the file. “I didn’t mean to hurt anyone,” Ray muttered. “I was just doing my job.”

“I know,” Hopper patiently replied. “I’m not here about that. I need your help.”

Ray’s eyes darted from Hopper to Murray before he closed the door. They heard the door being unlatched before it opened again, wider this time. “Help with what?” Ray asked.

Ten minutes, an explanation, and a few cigarettes later, the men sat in Ray’s living room. Finished explaining, Hopper asked, “So? Can you help?”

Ray shook his head. “I was just...just a technician. I’m not a scientist or anything.”

Hopper rubbed his face in frustration. *Was this a waste of time?* “Do you know anyone that can help? Anyone that maybe *was* , like, a scientist or anything?”

Ray bit his nail nervously before replying “Brenner.”

“Somebody *alive*,” Murray said.

“He is alive,” Roy answered.

“Bullshit,” Hopper said. “That thing, that...the monster killed him.”

But Ray shook his head. “No, it didn’t.” When Hopper and Murray shared a skeptical look, Ray said “I’m telling the truth, I swear! The...the Hawkins Lab people, they got him out of there before the police showed up.”

Murray shook his head. “He’s lying, Jim.”

Hopper sighed. “If he’s been alive all this time, then where the hell is he?”

“I don’t know,” Ray answered. “But...but he’s close! I could...I could call him.”

Hopper debated what to do. If, in fact, Dr. Brenner *were* alive, Hopper wanted to keep him as far away from El as possible. On the other hand, if Ray was telling the truth, he may be the only person that could heal Eleven.

“Call him,” Hopper said.

Ray nodded, picking up the phone as Murray said “Jim, obviously he’s lying.”

“Yeah, well, we’ll see,” Hopper said, lighting another cigarette.

Ray waited, his leg nervously tapping before saying “H...hi, Dr. Brenner? It’s Ray. I...” They watched Ray listen for a moment before saying “I...I know. Um...It’s important, though. I, um...someone from, from Hawkins. They came and saw me today. It...” Ray listened again. “It was an...an investigator,” he said, glancing at Murray. “He had a file on some of the kids. What do I...” He listened once more. “Okay. I’ll meet you there. Okay.” He hung up, looking at Jim. “There’s a diner, called TJ’s? He wants to meet me there.”

Hopper stubbed out his cigarette. “Guess we’re going to TJ’s, then.”

When they were done with breakfast, the trio of Will, Mike, and El took their bikes back down to Starcourt. Despite his efforts, Mike wasn't able to talk his girlfriend into not doing what she was planning.

Lucas, Dustin, and Max were waiting outside of the mall for them. As they got off their bikes, El went over to Max and the two girls embraced.

"How're you feeling?" Max asked.

"Good," Eleven answered, nodding. "Better."

After Mike and Will parked their bikes, Dustin made a face at Mike. "What's with you?"

"Nothing," Mike mumbled.

"He doesn't want El to do this," Will said.

"It's just a demodog," Lucas said. "It's not like it's the Mind Flayer or a full grown Demogorgon."

"I don't care," Mike said, glancing towards Eleven. "I still don't think she should be doing this."

"It may not even be there today," Dustin said.

"Yeah," added Max, as she and El came closer. "Besides, El can do what she wants."

Mike sighed. "El? Can I talk to you for a minute?"

She nodded, and Mike took her hand. "We'll meet you guys inside," he told their friends.

The group shrugged, and went into the mall.

Letting go of El's hand, Mike looked at her. He was going for one more last-ditch effort; but the look on her face let him know she'd

already made up her mind. Still...

"You don't have to do this," he reminded her.

"Mike..."

"Maybe you'll be feeling better in a couple of days. Or we can wait until Hopper gets back."

"Mike..."

"It doesn't *have* to be you. I know you want to...to help and everything, but you're putting yourself in danger."

"Mike," she said again, touching his cheek. "I can do it. Nothing is going to happen."

He sighed. "Fine. Just...if you feel yourself getting weak or anything; stop?"

"Okay," she said, nodding.

"Do you promise?"

"Promise."

Letting out another sigh, Mike nodded and took El's hand in his once more. The two made their way into the mall.

**

TJ's Diner was a small restaurant just off the 290 freeway. At the moment, Hopper and Murray sat in the parking lot, using Murray's van for their makeshift stakeout. Through binoculars, Hopper watched Ray Carroll sit at a booth in the diner, nervously alternating between looking at the door, the menu before him, and out in Hopper's direction.

"I don't trust this guy, Jim," Murray pointed out.

"Yeah, well, neither do I. He's the best of a shitty situation."

The two men sat in silence for a minute, watching people come and

go. Murray asked “What’re you going to do with Brenner?”

Hopper shook his head. “It’s not Brenner.”

“And what makes you think that?”

“He’s *dead*,” Hopper told him.

“Appearances can be deceiving, Jim. There’s a little boy in Hawkins that thinks a little girl used magic tricks to make him pee his pants, right?”

Hopper gave him a look, then turned back towards the diner. “What time is it?”

“Uhhh....twelve thirteen.”

“This guy was supposed to be here at noon.” Hopper sighed. “I told you, he’s lying.”

“Just give it a few more minutes.”

Hopper rubbed his face, frustrated. The longer things took, the more worried he became about Eleven. He’d meant to call her when he first got to Chicago, but hadn’t had the time yet. Maybe after this.

“So what’re you gonna do?” Murray asked.

“What?”

“With Brenner.”

“Drag his ass back to Hawkins,” Hopper answered. Using the binoculars, he peered towards the diner again. “Someone’s coming in.”

The two men sat forward, watching a tall man in a long coat and hat walk to Ray’s table. Ray seemed to stiffen up, and he and the man began to talk.

“Is that him?” Murray asked.

Hopper shook his head. “He’s wearing a hat.”

The man took a seat, taking his hat off as he did so. As soon as Hopper saw the hair, he closed his eyes, upset.

“What?” Murray asked.

“It’s him,” Hopper said, opening his eyes. “It’s Dr. Brenner.”

**

Back at Starcourt, Mike and El met up with their friends at *Scoops Ahoy*. Dustin, Lucas, Max, Will, Steve, and Robin sat crowded around a table.

“Okay,” Dustin said to the group. “Same teams as yesterday. Mike, you’ll be in the basement with Lucas and Max. El will be up top with...”

“I’m not leaving El,” Mike said.

Robin looked surprised. “Wait, *that’s* El?” she asked, looking at the girl. When El looked confused, Robin continued, saying “*She’s* the one that’s going to kill this thing?”

“She’s stronger than she looks,” Max chipped in.

“How do we even know this thing is going to come?” Lucas asked.

Dustin shook his backpack. “Meat chunks. Just like at the junkyard.”

“Alright,” Steve said. “We should probably...”

“Oh, and that reminds me,” Dustin said to Steve. “I think you and Robin should switch places.”

“What?” Steve and Robin asked at the same time.

“Why?” asked Will.

“If this thing is in the basement, Steve’ll have the bat. If we run into it outside, El’s here.”

“Makes sense,” Steve admitted. “Although there’s the whole issue of a twelve year-old bossing me around, but...”

"I'm fourteen," Dustin shot back.

"Okay, regardless of how old anyone is," Max said, "Let's just get this over with, okay?"

The group agreed and disbanded; Lucas, Max, and Steve went into the basement while Mike, Eleven, Will, Dustin, and Robin went outside.

Once outside, Dustin, Will, and Robin went about spreading little chunks of meat around the hole that appeared to lead into the mall.

Glancing at El, Robin asked "Can she really stop this thing?"

Dustin looked towards where she was glancing. "Who, El? Yeah."

"How ?"

"She can kind of...do things," Will said.

"Do things? Like what?"

"Like kill monsters from other dimensions," Dustin answered.

A few feet away, Mike and El stood. Taking El's hands, Mike asked "How're you feeling?"

"Mike, I'm okay," she answered.

"Okay," he said, nodding. "Just remember...be careful, alright?"

El nodded, just as the others joined them. Hiding behind a bush, they spent the next couple of minutes watching the meat to see if their bait would be collected.

"Anything?" Steve asked on the walkie.

"No," Dustin said. "Anything on your end?"

"Um, well, besides a spider, no."

"Copy."

Another five minutes went by, and nothing happened.

“How long is this supposed to take?” Robin asked.

“Maybe it’s gone,” Will said.

Fifteen more minutes went by with no signs until finally they heard the crunching of leaves nearby.

“Steve,” Dustin whispered into the walkie. “We may have something.”

“Like what?” Steve responded.

“Stand by for verification.”

The crunching got louder, and soon they could see a figure-something about the size of a dog-slowly making its way towards them as it chomped on the chunks of meat.

“Holy shit,” Robin whispered.

The animal didn’t appear to have a face; instead it’s head opened up as it swallowed the little meat before it, seemingly oblivious to the group watching it as they kneeled behind a bush.

“Demodog,” Dustin said. Looking to El, he asked “Ready?”

She nodded, and with a glance at Mike, she stood up. The creature still hadn’t seen her, and she walked a few steps towards it before stopping and planting her feet. The demodog looked up, and as it did so, El put out her hand, focusing on the creature.

The demodog roared as if in pain, but then began to charge at El.

“It’s not working,” Mike whispered, beginning to stand up.

“Just wait,” Dustin said, grabbing his arm.

El focused harder, and the demodog yelped before stopping in its tracks and running off into the woods.

When it was gone, the group behind the bushes stood. “El? Are you

okay?” Mike asked as he rushed up to her.

When she turned around, though, he had his answer. Blood was coming out of both nostrils as well as her ears. Her skin looked as pale as a piece of paper.

“El?” he asked. “What’s...”

But then her eyes rolled into the back of her head, and she collapsed, falling to the ground before Mike could catch her.

Notes for the Chapter:

I'm probably going to end up adding another chapter to this. Not sure when the next one will be; I've got some things going on in my life right now. Thanks for reading.

9. Papa Knows Best

Notes for the Chapter:

I'm trying to finish this story up, it's been such a long time. Hopefully will have the last two chapters up this weekend (crossing my fingers). Thanks for reading.

Last Night-

Eleven sat up in bed, a bedside lamp the only light in the room. It was a little past one in the morning, and the Byers home was quiet, everyone asleep.

Everyone except El, that is.

The teen sat, eyes on the empty tissue box at the end of the bed. Since the rest of the house had gone to sleep a little while ago, El had been determined to practice using her powers. So far she'd crumpled two paper cups, broken a pencil, and exhausted half a box of tissues in the process.

Still, she wasn't satisfied.

*It still hurt to use her powers; her head was pounding like crazy and she'd become more and more light-headed as time passed. The pile of tissues on the floor had been used for both her nose and ears. She knew that if anyone saw her, they'd be begging her to stop. But she **had** to do this. She had to be ready.*

Otherwise, what use was she?

Eleven knew that she was more than her powers; she was a friend, a daughter, a girlfriend, and much more. And as much as her powers could be a (kind of) burden, they were also very useful and helpful.

*Whenever she thought about all of the times she and her friends had come up against the otherworldly forces from the Upside Down, she knew that it'd been **her** that had come through. If she couldn't come through*

*again, if she couldn't do *this*-something as simple as crushing a stupid tissue box-then she didn't know what she was anymore.*

Extending her hand, she focused once more on the tissue box. It shook, but besides that, nothing happened.

*El lowered her arm, and wiped at her nose with her sleeve. Part of her wanted to rush into Will's room, wake up Mike and ask him to comfort her. It wasn't supposed to be this *hard*, she thought to herself. But if she were to be any use to anyone, she had to be able to do this. So putting up her arm again, she refocused on the empty box of tissue.*

With some effort, it shook, then crumpled up.

Eleven let out a breath, both happy she'd done it and exhausted from the effort it took; a spell of dizziness hit her, and she lay back against the pillows. Yes, it hurt, but she could do it. Wiping her nose and ears once more, El closed her eyes, happy with the progress she'd made.

"El! El!" Mike cried, rushing over to where she lay on the ground. Dustin and Will were right behind him. Falling to the ground next to her, Mike shook the still girl's shoulders.

Behind them, a freaked-out Robin brought the walkie to her lips. "Uh, Steve?"

"Yeah?" came his voice from the other side of the walkie.

"We've kind of got a problem here."

"What do you mean?"

"The girl....El. Something's happened."

"What do you mean, something's happened? Did it get her?"

"No, she just...she's unconscious."

"Uncon..." Robin heard static, as well as a few scattered voices before Steve returned. "We're on our way."

Mike continued to shake El's shoulders, figuring it was useless but not knowing what else to do. *I should have stopped her* , he thought to himself. *Why didn't I do anything?*

"Holy shit," Dustin muttered as he and Will knelt down. "What happened?"

"Is she alright?" Will asked Mike.

"No," Mike answered. Angrily, he muttered, "This is all you guys' fault."

Dustin looked shocked. "Our fault?" he asked. "How is this *our* fault?"

"Because you guys *forced* her into coming out here and fighting that... *thing* , and she hasn't been feeling well for days now. But you all just assume she can fight all our battles and..."

"We didn't force her to do anything," Dustin interrupted, sounding impatient. "She *wanted* to do it, and you just..."

"Guys, cut it out," Will said, speaking up. "How is this helping Eleven?"

Mike and Dustin exchanged a glance before Mike turned back to El, and gingerly lifted her up into his lap. Behind them there was the sound of feet and voices as Steve, Max, and Lucas came running onto the field. All three paused when they saw the sight in front of them. All of them came to their senses, though, as Max, then Lucas rushed to their friends on the ground.

"Is she okay?" Max asked.

"Does she *look* okay?" Mike asked.

Still standing, Robin said to Steve "That...that *thing* was here, and she stopped it, and then she just fainted or whatever."

"Where is it? Is it still here?" Steve asked, looking around.

"She scared it, or something," Robin said. Looking at Steve, she whispered, "What's wrong with her?"

"I don't know," Steve said. Then, coming to a decision, he said "Here," and handed Robin the spiked bat he'd brought.

"What? What am I..."

"Wheeler!" Steve called, digging into his pocket. "You think you can lift her?"

Mike hesitated, then began to lift a still unconscious El to her feet; Lucas and Will helping get her into his arms.

"I'm going to get my car," Steve said before turning back towards the mall.

"Where are we taking her?" Mike called.

"Home," Steve called back.

Miles away, Jim Hopper sat in the parking lot of TJ's Diner, his eyes on a man he'd thought was dead: Dr. Martin Brenner.

Brenner sat inside the diner, sitting across from Ray Carroll, chatting about something while Hopper sat in a parked van in the parking lot.

"Jim?" Murray Bauman, sitting in the driver's side of the van, asked. "What's the plan? Because I have serious doubts that our dear friend Ray is going to stall for much longer."

Hopper sighed. He didn't have a plan, not yet. All he knew was that he somehow had to get Brenner to tell him how to help El, or...

Or he had to bring Brenner back to Hawkins.

How to do that, though, was what he needed to figure out. He had no jurisdiction here. And he didn't think (*no, he knew*) Brenner

wouldn't come willingly. So now what?

Now , he thought, *You save your daughter.*

"Come on," Hopper finally said, opening the door.

"What? Me, too?" Murray asked, reluctantly getting out.

"In case he tries to run out the back. This guy's not coming without a fight."

"Jesus," Murray muttered, picking up the pace to match Hopper's stride. Jim directed Murray towards one exit while he went to the other.

Entering the diner, a bell rang over his head as he stepped inside. He immediately wished he had enough time to eat something, as it dawned on him that he hadn't eaten anything yet. Ignoring his stomach, he made his way towards the booth the two men sat in. Brenner's back was to him and Ray, facing Jim, looked up nervously as Hopper approached the booth. Seemingly alerting Brenner, the doctor began to turn but Jim sat next to him, blocking him in.

"Hey, doc," Hopper said, looking at the man he thought was dead. "Long time no see." He began to say something else, but finally catching an up-close glimpse of the doctor left him speechless.

The former director of Hawkins National Laboratory had looked the same when Jim had spied on him from the parking lot. But here, up close, Hopper could see he had a scar going down the left side of his face as if something- *and Hopper was pretty sure he knew what "thing" it was* -had dragged a claw down his face. His right ear looked as if it were missing a chunk of it, and there was a smaller scar that looked as if it began on his neck and continued down his chest.

Brenner looked from Hopper to Ray, apparently putting two and two together. He sneered at Ray before turning back to Hopper. "Hello, Detective," he said quietly.

"It's Chief," Jim said. "Chief Jim Hopper. And believe me, I don't want to be here anymore than you want me to."

"I highly doubt that," Brenner responded. "Does anyone want to tell me why we're all sitting here?"

Hopper looked up, his eyes meeting Murray's, who stood by the opposite exit. Jim waved him over. "We need to talk about your little science experiments," Hopper spoke, leaning on the table.

"What about them?" Brenner asked.

Hopper sighed as Murray joined the booth, sitting next to Ray Carroll. Jim really didn't want to talk to this man, this *monster*, about Eleven. But he knew there was probably nobody else who could help.

"If one of their....abilities started going on the fritz or something, would you be able to help them?"

Brenner lowered his head, thinking a moment before looking back up. "It's Eleven, isn't it?"

Hopper bit the inside of his lip, determined not to give anything away. "Would you?" he repeated.

"She didn't die, did she? That thing, it didn't kill her?" the doctor smiled knowingly. "She's still alive?"

"Yes or no," Hopper demanded.

Brenner, still with a smirk that made Hopper want to punch him, settled back into the cushioned seat. "Well, I would have to see her first," he answered. "But yes, I believe so."

Hopper took a moment to think, drumming his hand on the table as he did so.

"Jim?" Murray asked.

"What's causing it?" Hopper finally asked, looking up at Brenner.

"Causing what?"

"Her powers. Why are they acting up?"

“It could be anything, really,” Brenner said. “Overuse of powers, physical exhaustion. She could be sick. As I said, I would need to examine her.”

Again, Hopper was torn with what to do; he didn’t want this man anywhere near Eleven. He’d already done enough to her in El’s young life. Already he could picture the look of betrayal that’d be on his daughter’s face when he walked into Joyce’s house with her “Papa.” Not to mention how Joyce, Mike, and the rest of the group would react.

But he had to do *some* thing. Jim Hopper was a lot of things, but an expert in telekinetic teens with malfunctioning abilities wasn’t one of them. Besides, if this was (unfortunately) what it took to save El, he didn’t really have a choice.

Having made his decision, Hopper looked up at Murray. “You good on gas?”

The bearded man frowned, confused. “Uh..yeah?”

“Great. Because it’ll be a couple of hours to Hawkins,” Hopper answered. “Let’s go.”

“Jim, you’re not serious, are you?” Murray asked, standing as Hopper did as well.

“Come on, doc,” Hopper said, motioning for Brenner to stand up as well.

“Wh...what about me?” Ray asked, nervously looking from Brenner to Hopper.

“Pay for your piece of pie,” Hopper told him, “Then you go home.”

Ray looked once more back at Dr. Brenner. “What about *him* ?”

“He’s coming with us,” Hopper answered.

Back in Hawkins, Joyce Byers had just arrived home from work and

wasn't too surprised to see she had the house to herself. She figured Jonathan was either with Nancy or at work (or both, seeing as how they worked together). Will had mentioned something this morning about going to the mall with El and Mike.

Oh, El .

Joyce had had a bad feeling during her shift about El going out today. Granted, she *was* looking better than she did the other night, but Joyce knew she should probably be keeping a better eye on her. If Jim were here, there was no way she'd be allowed out of the house just yet.

Speaking of Hopper, *where was he?* It'd now been two days since he'd left, and she thought he'd be back by now. Even with the setback he'd apparently had in Boston, she thought there'd at least be some kind of communication from him. He'd said he had the name of someone in Chicago who could help. Who *that* was, she had no idea.

The phone rang, pulling her from her thoughts. She was on her way to answer it when a sudden commotion outside got her attention. Ignoring the phone, she went to the window and was shocked to see two cars come screeching to a stop in front of her house.

"What the..." she began, going to the door and pulling it open. Behind her, the phone continued to ring.

From the first car, Mike Wheeler jumped out, a look of panic on his face. "Mrs. Byers!" he called. "Something's wrong with Eleven!"

Steve Harrington got out of the driver's side, and a second later the back door opened and Max and Will got out, sharing the same panicked look as Mike. Out of the second car came Lucas and Dustin, and a young woman-about Steve's age-that Joyce didn't recognize.

Joyce ran down the steps to the first car, where Steve pulled an unconscious Eleven out.

"What's wrong with her?" Joyce asked as Steve made his way into her house, carrying Eleven. Joyce noticed the phone had stopped ringing.

"There was this...thing at the mall," Mike answered, the entire group trailing Steve inside. "And El, she...she stopped it, but then she just... *fell* ," Mike finished as Steve placed her on the couch.

"What do you mean she 'fell'? And what *thing* are you talking about?" she asked, looking the young girl over.

"A demodog," Dustin answered.

"A demo..." Joyce started, before looking at Will. "There was one of *those* at the mall? And you went down there?"

"I..." Will stammered.

"And I'm sorry, but who're you?" Joyce asked, turning to the girl she didn't recognize.

The girl looked taken aback. "I'm...I'm Robin," she finally answered. "I work with Steve."

Joyce glanced at Steve.

"She's cool," he explained.

Joyce shook her head before she turned back to Eleven. Feeling her forehead, Joyce was shocked to feel how warm it was. "Mike, go get me a washcloth with ice in it," she ordered. As Mike hopped up, Joyce began to gently shake El's shoulders. "El? Honey, we need you to wake up now."

Mike was back a minute later (after dropping a few ice cubes), and Joyce put the cold compress to the unconscious El's head.

"What do we do?" Max asked the group.

"We wait," Joyce said. In her head, she thought *Hurry, Hop* .

Miles away, just outside of Chicago, Jim Hopper climbed back into Murray's van.

“What’d you tell them?” Murray asked, sitting behind the steering wheel.

Hopper had gotten into the backseat, where he sat with their “guest,” Dr. Brenner. “Nothing,” Jim answered, closing the door. “Nobody picked up.”

Jim had attempted to call Joyce from the payphone outside of the diner, letting her know that he was coming back to Hawkins. Unfortunately, she hadn’t answered.

In a way, Hopper was happy; he wasn’t looking forward to telling Joyce about Brenner coming back to Hawkins with him. Hell, *Jim* didn’t like it. As much pain as this man had caused Eleven, Jim didn’t want him in the state as her, let alone the same room. But what other choice did he have?

“So...now what?” Murray asked.

“Now we get going,” Hopper said. “We can try again later.”

Murray shrugged, started the car, and pulled out of the parking lot.

Across from him, Hopper eyed Brenner, watching as the scientist looked out of the window at the passing scenery. Sensing Hopper was looking at him, Brenner turned to face the chief of police.

“I want to thank you,” Brenner said softly.

“Oh, yeah? What for?”

“For not manhandling me. My people were...less than gentle with you last time. It takes strong conviction not to retaliate.”

“Oh, that’s coming, doc,” Hopper said. “After what you did to that girl, those *children* ? You’re going to pay, one way or another.”

Brenner smiled. “She’s quite extraordinary, isn’t she? Eleven?”

Hopper didn’t respond, instead folding his arms and sitting back in his seat.

“Out of all of them, she showed the most promise. Her abilities, they’re just...”

“Will you shut up, man?” Hopper asked. “We’ve got a long drive ahead of us.”

Brenner’s smile faded, and the scientist leaned back in his own seat, closing his eyes.

Hopper sighed and began to brainstorm how to break this news to Eleven and the rest of the group in a few hours.

At the Byers home, Eleven still lay passed out on the couch. Around her, though, the room was busy. The rest of the Party sat around the kitchen table, always keeping one eye on her. Joyce, phone in hand, was pacing as far as the phone cord would let her. Robin stood near the door, arms folded as she wondered what her role was here. Steve, returning from the bathroom, made his way over to her.

“Hey. You okay?” he asked.

Robin looked amused. “Am I *okay* ? Let’s see...somebody’s blood is spilled all over the basement in the mall....I just saw a monster without a face try and kill us; there’s a girl with *superpowers* that used her mind thing to stop it, and now she might...” She shook her head, not finishing the sentence. “So no, no I’m not okay.” Quieter, she asked, “You’ve really been dealing with this stuff for two years?”

“Well, some days are easier than others,” he answered, folding his arms as he leaned against the wall next to her.

Robin shook her head once more. “Who would’ve thought my goofy-ass coworker was sitting on a secret like this.”

“Not so goofy now, huh?”

She smirked. “Oh, you’re still goofy.” Turning towards the girl on the couch, her voice turned serious as she asked “Is she going to be okay?”

Steve sighed. "I don't know."

"I'll tell you, just like I told the *last* two people I talked to," Joyce said impatiently into the phone. "I need Sam Owens, okay? Tell him it's Joyce Byers, I need him to call me. I...No, don't put me on hold again, I... *dammit* !" She slammed the phone back in its cradle.

"Mom, calm down," Will, standing a few feet away, said.

"These people are just... *arggh!* " she said, gritting her teeth. "What's the point in having Dr. Owen's phone number if *he's* not going to talk to me." Angrily, she grabbed her pack of cigarettes from the counter and disappeared into the next room.

At the kitchen table Mike, Lucas, Dustin, and Max sat, Will leaning against the sink as the group (mainly Mike) kept an eye on Eleven.

"Guys," Lucas spoke, "What're we going to do?"

"There's nothing we *can* do," Max answered. "We just have to wait until she wakes up."

"Or until Hopper gets back," Will said.

Dustin looked at Mike, waiting for his friend to say something. But Mike, who'd been quiet since the moment they'd sat down, continued to alternate between glancing at Eleven and looking down at the table without talking.

"What about that thing?" Dustin asked. "You know...the demodog."

"What about it?" asked Max.

"It's still out there," Dustin said. "What if it's, like...doing demodog stuff?"

"What's demodog stuff?" Lucas asked.

"You know; eating pets, crawling into malls. I mean, we didn't really stop it or anything."

"You mean *El* didn't really stop it," Max said.

"Yeah," Dustin conceded. "But she hurt it, right? So if it's still out there...it's injured. We can..."

"We aren't going to do anything," Lucas interrupted. "We need to do what we should've done in the first place; wait for Hopper to get back."

The group glanced once more at Mike, curious as to what he was thinking; apparently, it worked.

"Will you guys stop looking at me?" he finally muttered.

"Sorry," Will said.

"Lucas is right," he said. "There's nothing we can do."

Dustin sighed, but seemed to accept the group's decision.

"She's going to be okay," Will offered, attempting to make Mike feel better.

"Yeah, if any one of us is a fighter, it's *El*," Max said.

Mike shook his head. "It's all my fault."

"How is it *your* fault?" Lucas asked.

"I should've stopped her," he said.

"Uh, no offense, but I don't think you'd be *able* to," Max said, crossing her arms.

"You know what I mean."

"*El* made her own decision," Will said. "And we...we didn't really help," he admitted.

Mike turned to Dustin, who'd been unusually quiet for the last minute. "Sorry about snapping at you. At the mall."

His friend waved it off but shook Mike's hand, the group's signature

way of calling a truce. “You were right, though,” Dustin said, taking his hat off and running a hand through his hair. “It was kind of my fault.”

“Let’s just say it was everyone’s fault, and leave it at that, okay?” Max said. “We were all dumb.”

Over the next hour, the group alternated between talking about possible things to do next and sitting in silence, all of them worried about their friend on the couch. None more so than Mike. As he glanced at Eleven, he couldn’t help but worry he was going to lose her. *She’s been down before* , he told himself, *and she always gets back up. After the Gate. Saving me on the cliff. Contacting Will* . Despite repeating this to himself, he couldn’t help the feeling that this time was different. He’d never seen her so pale, and bleeding so much. When she’d collapsed after scaring off that *thing* at the mall, he’d thought-albeit for just a second-that she was dead. Mike didn’t know what he’d do if that were to happen; Eleven was the most important person in the world to him, the love of his life. He...

Mike blinked, realizing he was thinking about that word again, “love.” *Well* , he told himself, *There’s no use denying it now* . He loved El, and he promised himself that when she pulled out of this and things were back to normal, he’d make sure he told her how he felt.

But as he glanced at her again, looking so small and helpless on the couch, he wondered when that would be.

Miles away, Murray’s van made its way down the freeway, headed to Hawkins.

“How much longer?” Hopper called up to Murray.

“An hour, maybe two. Why?” Murray responded.

Jim glanced at Brenner, who was either sleeping or doing a bang-up job of pretending to. Ignoring the doctor for now, Hopper leaned forward for a private conversation with Murray. “Is there a truck stop coming up soon?”

Murray squinted at a road sign. "In a few miles."

"I need to call again," Hopper said quietly. "Give them a heads up."

Murray peered over Hopper's head at their napping guest. "What're you going to do with him?"

Hopper sighed. "I don't know."

And he didn't, not really. Assuming he could "fix" whatever was wrong with El-and would do so, no stipulations-Jim was unsure of how to proceed after the deed was done. He knew what he'd *like* to do, but didn't know if it would come to that. Maybe he could talk to Owens, see if his people could make Brenner "disappear."

"Well, I'd think of something fast," Murray said. "Because we'll be in Hawkins before you know it. And a lot of people are going to be wanting some answers, Jim."

"Just drive," Hopper muttered, drifting to the back seat. He watched Brenner sleep and looked over the man again. *What had he been up to, since that night in the middle school ? What hole had he been hiding in?*

Minutes later they pulled into a rest stop, the van's abrupt stop awakening Brenner. Hopper watched as the doctor slowly opened his eyes, taking in his surroundings before his gaze landed on Jim. "Are we there already?"

"Almost," Hopper admitted. "We're making a stop."

Back at the Byers', Robin and Steve had made their way into the kitchen, joining the Party as they talked about the last few days. Joyce hadn't emerged from her room yet.

During a break in the conversation, Robin quietly told Steve "I should get out of here."

"What for?" he responded.

"Well for one, this isn't how I thought I'd be spending my day off,"

she said. She glanced at Eleven, on the couch. “And really, I commend the hell out of you guys for living with this stuff for the last two years. But fighting monsters from other dimensions with a girl from the X-Men? It’s...it’s a lot to take in on one day.” She shook her head. “And I don’t know what I’m doing here, to be honest.”

Steve started to say something, just as the phone rang next to him. Out of instinct, he started to answer it before Joyce returned to the room and snatched it out of its receiver. “Dr. Owens?” she asked.

There was a pause, then Hopper’s voice saying “No, it’s me.”

“Oh. Hopper,” Joyce said. Around her, the rest of the room sat up at full attention.

“Expecting the doc, Joyce?”

Joyce sighed. “Something...happened here.”

“What do you mean, something *happened* ?” Joyce could hear the panic in his voice.

She spent the next minute catching him up on what’d happened since he left, from El’s tiredness to the incident at the mall to Eleven’s current condition. When she finished, it took Hopper a minute to gather his thoughts. Finally, he muttered “Jesus. How is she now?”

“Still sleeping.” She waited for a beat, then asked “Where have *you* been?”

“Chicago,” he answered. “That’s actually why I called.”

“Did you find someone who could help?”

“Yeah, actually; I did. It’s, uh...” He let out a breath. “It’s Brenner.”

Joyce froze upon hearing the name. “ *What* ?” she asked into the phone. “He’s *dead* .”

“No, uh...no he’s not. Listen...it’s a long story, but I should be there in about an hour and hopefully, this’ll all be over.”

“Hop...”

“When she wakes up, I don’t want you to tell her anything, understand? Let her know I’m coming, but don’t mention *him* , okay? I’ll tell her myself. And keep trying Owens.”

Cupping the phone, Joyce turned her back to the group in her kitchen. “How is he alive?”

“I’ll explain everything when I get there,” Hopper said. “And Joyce...I’m sorry, but there was no other way.”

Joyce sighed. “Get here. *Fast* .”

“I will.” He hung up.

Joyce hung the phone as well and turned back to her son and his friends. As if reading the worried look on her face, Will asked “What...what’s going on?”

“Hopper’s coming,” Joyce answered. “He should be here soon.”

“Is he going to be able to help El?” asked Mike.

“He thinks so,” Joyce said.

“How?”

Joyce debated telling them about exactly *who* was going to help Eleven. Before she could decide on how to respond, though, there was a cough and soft moans from the couch. Everyone turned to see Eleven beginning to stir. Mike was the first one up, followed by Joyce and the rest of the group as they rushed to the couch.

“El!” Mike said, smiling widely. “You’re okay!”

“Mike?” she whispered, coughing again. She began to sit up but paused, steadying herself. “What happened?”

“Give her a minute,” Joyce said, kneeling next to her. She touched El’s head and frowned. “Sweetie, you’re burning up,” she told her. Turning to the boys, she instructed Will to grab ice from the kitchen.

"How are you feeling?" Joyce asked when she turned back to El.

Eleven moaned again, holding her head. "I'm...dizzy," she said, taking a breath. Removing her hand, she looked up. "The demodog. Where...where is it?"

"Don't worry about it," Mike answered. "Just worry about getting better, okay?"

Will returned with the ice, and Joyce took it and put it to Eleven's head. "I'm going to get you something to eat," she told El. "Maybe that'll help." Standing, she told the others "Don't get her too excited. I'll be back in a minute."

The group waited a moment for Joyce to go to the kitchen before turning back to El, all kinds of questions coming out:

"Are you okay?"

"What happened, El?"

"How do you feel?"

"Do you think it's dead?"

"Guys," Mike said, putting an end to the questioning. "Back off, alright? Give her some space." The group murmured an "okay" before taking a few steps away; Steve and Robin retreated back by the door, while the party-Lucas, Will, Dustin, and Max-stepped into the dining room. To no one's surprise, Mike stayed with Eleven.

"Are you okay?" she asked as he put the ice to her forehead.

"I'm fine, El," he answered. "Don't worry about me." She sighed, her left hand finding his free hand and giving it a squeeze.

"I'm sorry," she told him.

Mike looked confused. "What're you sorry for?"

She sniffled. "I...should have listened to you. I shouldn't have...done it."

Mike shook his head. "Don't worry about that, El." Then, his curiosity getting the better of him, he asked "What's the last thing you remember?"

Eleven seemed to think about it before responding, saying "I...hurt it." She looked to Mike for confirmation before continuing. "Then...everything hurt."

"You fell," Mike said. "You passed out."

"How long?"

He shrugged. "A few hours."

"Hopper...?"

Mike shook his head. "He isn't back yet. But he called; he's on his way."

She nodded, closing her eyes as Mike held the ice pack to her head. He was still bothered; El was still so pale, and the fever certainly didn't help things. He remembered how when they'd first met Eleven, rest and food usually helped her "recharge her battery." Hopefully, whatever Mrs. Byers was whipping up in the kitchen would make her feel better.

Because in the end, Mike knew, that's all he wanted-for El to feel better, to be her *self* again. He wanted Hopper to come back with whoever it was that was supposed to help El feel well, so they could get things back to normal; well, as normal as things could be here in Hawkins. He just wanted this whole thing to end, so they could go back to being stupid teenagers enjoying their summer vacation. He'd find the right time before school started to take Eleven on a picnic, tell her he loved her, and...

His thoughts from earlier came back, about wanting to tell her how he felt, *now*. But was this the right time?

His mouth seemed to decide for him, as he heard his voice ask, "El?"

Her eyes opened, and she turned to look at him. "Yes?"

“There’s something I want to tell you.”

“Okay,” she replied, eyes scanning his face, curious.

Mike inhaled, then slowly let out a breath. “I, um...”

“Here you go,” Mrs. Byers said, coming into the room, holding a tray with a steaming bowl of something. “Chicken soup always helps Will and Jonathan, and...” She looked at the two teens. “I’m sorry. Were you two...?”

El looked from Mike to Joyce. “Mike was going to tell me something.”

“Oh. Then I will...”

There was a sudden knock at the door, and the three of their heads looked in that direction. Putting the tray down, Joyce headed to the door.

“It might be Hopper,” Mike said to Eleven as he stood. “I’ll be right back.”

When Joyce finally opened the door, she was slightly disappointed, but also relieved with who was there.

“Dr. Owens,” she said, letting out the breath she didn’t know she’d been holding.

Sam Owens looked confused as he took in not only Joyce but the gathered teens standing behind her. “Mrs. Byers,” he finally replied. “They didn’t tell me you were having a party.”

Joyce allowed herself a small smile before saying “We need your help.”

Dr. Owens followed Joyce inside, making their way to the couch where Eleven sat, wondering what was going on.

“Hello,” Dr. Owens said. “Long time no see.”

Joyce-with help from the assorted company-told him about what'd happened during the last few hours, how they'd arrived at this point. Once he was caught up, Dr. Owens frowned before looking to El. "And how are you feeling now?"

"Tired," she answered.

"I would imagine," he told her, offering a smile.

"Can you help her?" Joyce asked.

Sam Owens sighed. "I need to run a few tests...is there somewhere more...private?"

"You can use my room," Joyce said.

"No," Eleven said.

All of the heads in the room turned to her.

"No tests," she explained.

"Sweetie," Joyce said, kneeling next to her. "Dr. Owens just wants to make sure you're okay, that's all."

"I'll go with you," Mike offered.

"No," Joyce countered. " *I'll* go with her. The rest of you just stay out here."

With Mike's help, they were able to get Eleven standing and moved into Joyce's bedroom. Once he was shooed away, Mike returned to the front room with his friends.

Lucas, Max, and Will sat on the couch. Steve and Robin remained standing, this time with Dustin. Mike sat in an easy chair.

"Assuming Dr. Owens is able to help her," Lucas began, "Then what?"

"Then we go after the demodog," Dustin answered.

"You guys saw El," Will argued. "She barely hurt that thing and it nearly killed her. There's got to be another way."

“Well, Hopper’s coming back, right?” Steve asked. “Just have him kill it.”

“I know I’m new to all of this,” Robin said, “But is a gun enough to put this thing down?”

“They don’t have any kind of armor,” Dustin said. “They’re flesh and bone.”

“But there’s only one this time,” Mike said. “Right? It shouldn’t be that hard.”

“Says the kid with the telepathic girlfriend,” Robin pointed out.

For the next half hour, the conversation wavered, with talks going from theories about what was happening with Eleven’s powers to dealing with the demodog to what they were going to do for dinner. Mike’s gaze continually drifted towards the hallway, as he wondered what was going on with Eleven. Besides Joyce coming out to grab something every so often, there was no update.

“Someone’s here,” Robin, near the window, noticed. The sun had been slowly setting while they waited, and the headlights from the approaching vehicle lit up the house. Dustin, next to her, glanced outside.

“Is it Jonathan?” Will asked.

“No, it’s a van,” Dustin said. The rest of the group craned their necks to look out the window as the van parked. The room watched as there was movement in the van; all they could see was the driver, a bearded man who was talking to someone behind him. After what seemed like an eternity, the back door of the van opened and Jim Hopper stepped out. The chief squinted at the group at the window before coming to the door and inside.

“What the hell is going on?” he asked, shutting the door behind him.

“Where’ve you been?” Mike asked.

“Good to see you, too, Mike,” Hopper told him. “Where’s Joyce?”

Immediately, all of the young teens-Mike, Dustin, Lucas, Max, and Will began talking at once. “Hey!” Hopper bellowed, silencing them. “One at a damn time.” Pointing at Mike, he said, “You first.”

“El’s in Mrs. Byers’s bedroom, getting tested by Dr. Owens.”

The chief softened a little. “Is she any better?”

“Kind of,” Mike answered.

Hopper sighed, turning to Dustin. “You. Go.”

“There’s a demodog out there. We think it killed somebody in the mall, and now it’s out there somewhere, doing God knows what!”

Hopper groaned. “Yeah, Joyce mentioned something about that.” Looking at the kids, he asked “And whose idea was it to get her to go after that thing, anyway?” Glancing towards Steve and Robin, he asked “And who’re you?”

“Oh! I’m, uh, Robin. I work at Scoops with Steve.”

Hopper shook his head as Joyce entered the room. “Hop,” she said. “Thank goodness you’re okay.”

“How is she?”

“She’s getting better,” Joyce answered, “Dr. Owens is with her.” Folding her arms, she asked, “Is he here?”

“Is who here?” Mike asked.

When Hopper hesitated, Joyce told him “They’re going to find out anyway, Hop.”

Running a hand over his face, Hopper sighed. “Look,” he finally said. “I had to make a call, alright? In order to make sure El was okay, I needed to bring someone in.”

“Well, who is it?” asked Max.

Glancing at Joyce again, Hopper said “Dr. Brenner.”

“ *What?* ” Mike asked as the other teens made sounds of shock and disgust.

“Who’s Brenner?” Steve asked amid the noise.

“He used to run Hawkins Lab,” Dustin said.

“He’s the mad scientist that kept El captive for twelve years,” Mike said, glaring at Hopper.

“ *And* he’s the one who told everyone I died in the quarry,” Will said.

“But he’s *dead* ,” Lucas argued. “Right?”

“He’s not dead,” Hopper said. “I don’t know how, but he’s alive.” When the group started to argue with him, he got louder, saying “Look! I made a choice. I needed to do what was best for El. She’s *my* daughter.”

“How could you do this to her?” Mike started. “He’s a raving lunatic that...”

“We’ll talk about this later,” Hopper told him. “Right now, we need to...” He paused, and the rest of the group followed his line of sight—he was looking to the hallway, where Eleven stood.

“Sorry,” Dr. Owens said, stepping out of the hallway as well. “Chief. Good to see you.”

“El,” Hopper began. “Hey, kid. How’re you...”

“You brought...Papa?” she asked, hesitantly. Even from where he stood, Hopper could see the hurt on her face.

“El, look. I didn’t have a choice. I needed *someone* , okay?”

“No,” she said sternly, shaking her head.

“Sweetie,” Joyce pleaded.

“ *No* ,” Eleven repeated. With a lift of her chin, the couch where she’d

recently been laying on slid across the floor. As Dr. Owens moved out of the way, the couch stopped, blocking the hallway.

“El, cut it out,” Hopper warned. But instead of stopping, Eleven used her hand, and moved an easy chair and the kitchen table, stacking them on top of the couch. With that, they heard her footsteps scurry down the hall.

“She’s got her powers back,” Robin said, earning a glare from Hopper.

“Jesus Christ,” he muttered under his breath, going over to the makeshift barricade. With some help from Steve, the two were able to get everything out of the way in minutes. Once that was done, Hopper started down the hallway, Joyce and Mike right behind him.

The only closed door was Joyce’s bedroom, and when they entered the room, they were surprised to see that Eleven was missing.

“Where’d she go?” Joyce wondered aloud as the three scanned the room.

“Window,” Mike said, pointing to the window that’d been propped open.

“*Shit*,” Hopper said, going to the window and looking outside. “El!” he hollered. Getting no response, he brought his head indoors and began marching to the door.

“This is your fault,” Mike said, behind him.

“Not now,” Hopper answered.

“If you hadn’t brought that...that *monster* here, she wouldn’t...”

Hopper stopped on his heels and faced Mike, startling the teen. “*Look*,” the big man began, “We don’t have time for this blame-game crap right now. You wanna be mad at me? *Fine*. But be mad in your head, ‘cause I don’t want to hear it right now.”

Mike opened his mouth to say something, but was cut off by a voice from the front of the house. “Jim!”

Hopper, Mike, and Joyce rushed to the living room and were greeted by everyone else and a new addition-Murray Bauman.

Hopper frowned, seeing the journalist. "Murray? What the hell are you...."

"He hit me," Murray answered. "Knocked me over the head, a minute after you got out of the car." He held a hand to the back of the head.

"He's out there?" Lucas asked.

"Guys? Where's El?" asked Max.

Mike, Hopper, and Joyce exchanged looks before all three of them dashed out into the night.

A ways away, Eleven sat, crouched near a tree as she wondered what to do next. She didn't know which was worse-that Papa was still alive, or that Hopper had brought him *here* .

Feeling dizzy, she held her head; the effort of using her powers had drained her, and she was having a hard time staying focused.

"El!" she heard a voice call; Mike's

"El!" came a second voice; Joyce.

She didn't know what to do; part of her wanted to stand and call back to them. She didn't know if she had it in her to keep running. Still, another part-the part that was winning-wanted to stay where she was. El knew that if she went back to the house, she would eventually come face-to-face with Papa

Another wave of dizziness overtook her, and she let out a moan as she put a hand against the tree, steadying herself.

She heard Mike's voice again, calling her name- *were they going the wrong way?* -and she weakly called back. "Here," she answered. "Mike! I'm...I'm over here." Her call came out barely audible, and she doubted anyone heard her.

So she was surprised when, seconds later, there was the sound of footsteps coming from behind her. Turning, she asked, “Mike?”

From the shadows behind her, a different figure appeared. “Hello, Eleven,” Dr. Brenner said.

10. The Hunting Party

The night of Saturday, November 12, 1983

Pain.

It reverberates through his body as if every part of him, every cell and atom is on fire.

Above him, the monster bellows, baring those seemingly endless teeth.

I'm going to die, Martin Brenner thinks.

The monster had slashed his face as he'd knocked Brenner down, and at the moment one of its claws was digging into his chest; Brenner could taste blood in his throat.

Suddenly there was an explosion of sound, a firecracker of noise as bullets riddled the monster. Besides getting its attention, the gunfire appeared to do next to nothing. Letting out a roar, the monster leaped off of Brenner, off to attack its next victim.

Brenner clutched his face and took what he was sure would be one of his last breaths. He hears more gunfire, farther away now, followed by the roar of the beast.

Where's Eleven? he thought to himself. Surely she will save me. He vaguely remembered her being picked up and whisked away by one of the other children. But where did they go?

Brenner attempted to move, but with all of the pain-his face burned and the injury to his chest was making it hard to breathe-he decided to stay where he was.

The gunfire had stopped but he could hear the monster, farther away now; its roar filling the school building. Then came the sound of children yelling over one another as they argued.

He closed his eyes and, moments later, when he heard the roar of the

monster again-this time even louder, somehow-he thought this was it; it'd come back to finish the job. So he was surprised when the roar ended just as it began.

What happened? he wondered as his eyes closed once more.

He's woken, later-he's not sure how much time has passed-by the sound of footsteps, and someone calling "He's over here!"

That brings more footsteps, and Brenner finally opens his eyes. He sees three people standing over them, guns at their side.

"Wh.." he begins, but it's hard to form words.

"Let's get you out of here, Dr. Brenner," one of the men says, as he feels himself lifted to a standing position.

"Where's Eleven," he murmurs weakly.

"What'd he say?" another man asks.

"Doesn't matter," the first one says. "We need to get him out of here before the locals arrive."

He's escorted-nearly carried, he's so weak-out of the school building and placed in the back of a car. The car speeds off, and before he knows it he's drifted off.

The next time he wakes he's in a hospital bed. There are tubes connected to him and a bandage on the left side of his face. With his right eye he scans the room, but even tilting his head causes him to wince in pain.

It isn't long before he's visited by government men where he's bombarded with questions about what'd been going on at Hawkins National Laboratory in the past week. He answers truthfully, knowing there's no reason to lie; they'd find out anyway. Curious, he asks about what happened at the school, and what happened to Eleven. They avoid the questions at first, casting glances at one another that tell him they're hiding something. Eventually, though, he learns that the monster is gone, supposedly killed by Eleven with the process killing her, too.

Brenner grimaces at hearing the news: he's lost test subjects before, yes, but Eleven was showing more potential than he'd ever seen, and he knew that if he'd had the chance to "fix" her, they would have worked wonders together.

After that, it's a series of nondisclosure agreements, reprimands from his superiors, and an eventual discharge from whatever hospital they're hiding him in. He's given what's effectively a severance package and told to leave town. In the end, he settles in Glencoe, IL, toiling away and not sure what to do. Thankfully he still has connections in the government and is able to get a job to his satisfaction.

But still, he sometimes wonders what he could have done if he'd only had more time.

When she wakes, it takes a moment for Eleven's eyes to adjust to the dim light. She's on her back, and the first thing she sees is a ceiling; it's familiar, but she doesn't know why. Her mind races as she tries to remember what had happened; she'd been in the woods...she'd heard Mike's voice, calling for her...then someone came out of the woods.

Her eyes widen as she remembers:

Papa .

She tries to scramble up as it starts to dawn on her that she's confined-her arms and legs are strapped, limiting her movements. Focusing, she attempts to use her powers to free herself. But all she gets for her efforts is a headache.

"You're awake," a relieved voice says, and she doesn't need to look to see who it is. Papa-Brenner-steps out of the shadows, hands behind his back as he offers her a smile. "I was afraid the sedative I gave you was too much."

She didn't respond verbally. Instead, she tried again to free herself from her restraints.

"It's useless to struggle, Eleven," he told her, pulling out a chair and sitting next to her. "You're weak," he explained. "I hear you've been

having...difficulties, with your powers. And that's why I'm here." Smiling, he added, "I'm here to help you."

Eleven tried to use her powers once more, focusing with all her might to be free. Again, there was no result. "I don't want your help," she said, finally speaking.

Brenner smiled. "It's good to hear your voice again. But yes, Eleven, you do need my help. And now that we're back here, back home," he said, looking around the room, "I can give you what you need." Standing, he said "So much has changed. It seems like only yesterday we were here, doesn't it, Eleven?"

"My name is *El*," she corrected.

He gave her a curt nod. "Well. I will be back." He disappeared, walking again into the shadows.

Knowing it was useless, and not caring, Eleven once again pulled at her restraints. Frustrated, she let out a yell, knowing that no one would hear her.

At the Byers home, the search for Eleven was in progress. After returning to the house and grabbing whatever flashlights they could find, the group had splintered apart:

Hopper and Joyce took one area of the backwoods together.

The Party-Mike, Will, Lucas, Dustin, and Max-took another area with Steve and Robin, walkies in hand to stay in touch with the adults.

Finally, Murray and Sam Owens were still at the house, in the off chance that either Eleven or Martin Brenner returned.

"Will you slow down?" Joyce asked, trailing behind Hopper. "It's like I'm in the Indy 500, trying to keep up with you."

"Walk faster, then" Hopper shot back, shining his flashlight beam around. Still, he paused for a moment to let her catch up.

"Do you really think she made it this far?" Joyce asked, finally meeting up with Jim.

"I don't know," he answered, eyes searching the woods. "But I'm not letting up until I find her." He started walking again, with Joyce just a few steps behind. Cupping her hands, she yelled "El!" When there was still no response, she said "Hop, I don't think she's out here."

"Then where the hell is she, Joyce?" he asked, stopping again. "She's not at the house, she's not out here."

"Hop..."

"No," he said, sighing. "We keep looking until we find one of them."

"Hey," she said, taking his arm and keeping him from walking. "What's going on?"

Taking a second to catch his breath, he answered "This is because of me. All of this..."

"Jim..."

"I should've...I should've known that prick had something up his sleeve. I should've just...I should've just had doc Owens examine her. And now...they're both out here, somewhere, and..." He shook his head. Finally looking at Joyce, he said "If he's hurt her..."

"Hey," she said, squeezing his arm. "Don't think like that. We're going to find her."

Hopper nodded and started walking again. "We'd better find her before he does. Because if he's got her...I'm gonna kill him."

Joyce's eyes widened, surprised at his words, but she didn't respond. Instead, cupping her hands once more, she called out "El!"

"El!" Dustin yelled, on the other side of the woods surrounding the Byers' house. The Party's flashlights scanned the dark with every step they took.

"Guys," Dustin said, talking to his friends, "It's been, like, an hour. How long do we..."

"It's only been fifteen minutes, Dustin," Will pointed out.

"And we keep looking until we find her," Mike said. "We don't leave a Party member behind."

They walked for a moment until Max asked "What do you think he wants with her? This Brenner guy?"

"Beats me," Mike answered. Shaking his head, he added, "He never should've brought him back to Hawkins."

"Who?" asked Lucas.

"Who do you think? Hopper."

"Mike, he was just trying to help her," Will said.

"Well, he did the stupidest thing imaginable."

"What else could he have done?" Will asked.

"I don't know," Mike answered. "But anything is better than this."

"You do know if you'd told him about El's nosebleeds, this may not have happened," Lucas said.

Mike stopped walking and turned to his friend. "So now you're blaming me?"

"No," Lucas said, "I'm just saying, you kept it a secret."

"Well, technically, *El* kept it a secret, too," Dustin pointed out. "So she might be at fault, too."

"You're blaming El for this?" Max asked, shining her light in Dustin's face.

Shielding his face, Dustin said, "It's not anybody's fault, I'm just pointing it out."

“Yeah, pointing out that all of this is me and El’s fault,” Mike said.

“Guys...” Will said, speaking up.

“We’re not the ones that brought Brenner here, are we?” Mike argued.

“And isn’t one of the Party rules that we keep things *in* the group?” Max asked.

“That’s if it’s not a life or death situation,” Lucas argued.

“When is anything *not* a life or death situation with you guys?” Max asked, exasperated.

“Look, the point is that *someone* should have said *something*,” Dustin said.

“Right,” Lucas said. “If Mike or El would’ve told Hopper, we might not be out here.”

“That is such bull,” Mike said defensively.

“How is that bull? El could have *died*,” Lucas said.

“The fact of the matter is, El never would’ve ran off if Hopper didn’t bring Brenner back to Hawkins!” Mike said, nearly screaming.

“We don’t even know if he can help, anyway,” Max said.

The group (minus Will) began talking over themselves, all desperate to get their points across. Behind them, there was rustling in the grass as Steve and Robin caught up to them.

“Hey, hey!” Steve said, raising his voice over the noise. It immediately got silent. “Will you shitheads cut it out?” In one hand he held his flashlight, the beam shining on the Party. In his other hand was the spiked bat.

“They’re blaming me...” Mike began.

“I don’t care!” Steve said. “Knock it off, before one of you little turds

gives me a headache.”

Mike, Lucas, and Max huffed, but they stayed quiet. Reluctantly, Mike turned and continued to lead the search. After a second Will, then Max, and finally Dustin and Lucas followed suit.

Leading the way, Mike cursed under his breath, frustrated with the way things were going. *Weren't they allowed to be regular kids once in a while?*

All Mike wanted this summer was to hang out with his friends, see a few movies, play some games, and spend time with his girlfriend. *Was that too much to ask?*

He was also hurting some about what Lucas had said, that this situation they found themselves in was partly his fault. It was something that he himself had been thinking for a while now.

What *if* he had told Hopper about El's nosebleeds? Would they be here, searching the woods for her in the dark? Would Brenner have been brought back to Hawkins? How far would *any* of this have gone?

It didn't matter right now, he told himself. All that mattered was finding El. If needed, he would go to the ends of the earth in order to get her back. He wasn't going to let Brenner, Hopper, or anything else stop him from that.

“Wow,” Robin said, as she and Steve followed behind the kids.

“What?” asked Steve.

“What you said to them,” she said, motioning to the group in front of them.

Steve shook his head. “What, that? It's nothing. Believe me, I've been these damn kids' babysitter for a year now, I know how to get them in line.”

Robin smiled. “Dave should have *you* train the new employees.”

Steve returned the smile. "I don't know how much longer I'm gonna stay at Scoops."

"Come on, Harrington," she said. "Who else am I gonna sling ice cream with?"

"Is that your way of saying you like working with me, Robin?"

"I didn't say that," she said. "But you are more interesting than I gave you credit for. I mean, who'd have thought I'd start my day watching a girl with mind powers try and kill a monster to now, looking in the woods for her and some mad, evil, scientist guy."

"It never gets boring, I'll give you that," he said.

They walked for a moment, the kids getting further ahead, when Robin asked, "What time is it?"

"Uh," Steve said, glancing at his watch. "Ten fifteen. Why? You got a hot date or something?"

"No," Robin said, stopping. Steve walked back to her and watched her think for a second.

"What's wrong?"

"Don't you think we should've found them by now?" she asked. "I mean, I get that this is a big area to look and they had a head start, but we should've found *some* thing."

"Yeah, and what's your point?"

She bit her lip, thinking again. "Where would he take her?"

"What?"

"Where would the guy..."

"Brenner?"

"Yeah. If he got El, where would he take her?"

Her voice giving out, Eleven had decided to stop screaming and instead take notice of where she was. It was dark, but a few things stood out in the shadows: a dimly lit food court, a fountain that currently wasn't shooting water, and, a little farther down, the Scoops Ahoy logo.

Why are we at the mall? she wondered.

Craning her neck, she took a glance around the room, trying to find out where Papa... *Brenner*, she reminded herself...had run off to. Not seeing him, she decided to try something.

El closed her eyes and tried to focus on the faint hum of the neon lights around her. Her mind clear, she focused on one person:

Mike.

There was nothing at first; her head hurt, and she began to feel a small trickle of blood come from her nose. Pushing past the pain, she doubled her efforts in an attempt to better the connection.

Just as she was about to give up, she faintly heard Mike's voice.

"We already looked over there," he was saying, talking to someone she couldn't see. She could see Mike, his back to her as he walked, shining a flashlight in front of him. His other hand held the Supercomm to his face. Eleven could hear people around her but didn't know who they were.

"Go back?" Mike asked, talking to whoever was on the walkie. "But she's still out here! We can't..." He stopped suddenly and turned in her direction. Lowering the walkie, he asked, "Do you guys feel that?"

Concentrating with everything she had left, Eleven said "Mike. Help. Starcourt."

And with that, she was out of the void.

Her eyes opening, she gasped as pain shot through her brain. Instinctively, she tried to hold her head but the restraints made it impossible. Instead, she let out a whimper just as her eyes closed, passing out from exhaustion.

“Seriously, you guys didn’t hear that?” Mike asked.

“Hear what?” asked Dustin.

“It was like...it was like Eleven was here.”

The group didn’t say anything for a moment, before Max said, “Maybe she was doing her thing.”

“Her ‘thing’?” Lucas asked.

“You know when she closes her eyes and spies on people or whatever.”

The other boys looked at Mike, who was deep in thought. Finally, Will asked, “What is it, Mike?”

“I think she was trying to tell me something.”

“Tell you something? Like what?” Dustin asked.

“I don’t know, it was like...star...something.”

“Star?” Dustin asked. “Maybe she’s outside? I mean, there *are* stars in the sky.”

“Then why haven’t we found her?” asked Lucas.

“Guys! Maybe she said Star *court* ?” Max asked.

Mike frowned. “That doesn’t make sense, why would she...”

“Think about it,” Max said. “This Brenner guy, he doesn’t know the lab isn’t there anymore. Maybe he took her there because that’s where this all started, right?”

“You’re right,” Mike said, getting excited. “Let’s go!”

“How are we...” Lucas started.

“Our bikes,” Mike said, already heading back to the house, “We can

get them out of Steve's car."

"Shouldn't we tell Hopper, or Steve?" Dustin asked.

"They'll just try and stop us," Mike answered. "Come on."

"Try and stop what?" came a voice, as Steve and Robin caught up with them.

The group looked at Mike, before Dustin spoke, saying "We think Eleven's at Starcourt."

"Why would she be at the mall?" asked Robin.

"Because Brenner doesn't know the lab's not there anymore," Max said.

"We're wasting time," Mike said, turning back to the house. "I'm going."

"Hold on," Steve said, grabbing his walkie. "Let me get Hopper."

"No," Mike argued. "He's just going to make us wait for him. We need to go *now*."

Steve exhaled, before handing the walkie to Robin. His coworker gave him a befuddled look. "Um, what're you doing?" she asked him.

"Going with them," Steve answered.

"Wait, *what?*"

The Party, now with Steve, began sprinting to the house. "Give us a five-minute head start," Steve called.

Robin stood there for a moment, confused, before turning and running after them.

When the Party got to the car, as Steve fumbled finding his keys, they were surprised to see Robin coming out of the woods.

"What're you doing?" Steve asked her.

“Harrington, you are *not* leaving me out here by myself,” she said, opening her own car.

“I left you the bat,” Steve responded, finding his keys and opening his car. Mike and Will got into the car with Steve while Dustin, Lucas, and Max climbed into Robin’s. Within seconds, the two cars were off.

When Eleven woke up again, she was somewhere different, a smaller room this time. Immediately she tried to sit up, and found that she was no longer bound to anything. However, as soon as she sat up, she was hit with a wave of disorientation.

“Awake again,” she heard someone say behind her. Once more, without looking, she knew who it was. El held her head as she looked over her shoulder at Brenner. “I had to move you,” he continued. “There was too much of a risk out there. In the open.”

“Why are we...” she began, but stopped when she felt dizzy again, “Why are we at Starcourt?”

“I wasn’t aware that the lab was gone,” he said. Eleven noticed he was arranging something, but his body blocked her view. “So I have to make do with what I have.”

He turned, holding both a medical bag and a bag that read *Starcourt* on it. Taking a seat next to her, he said “Now, Eleven. Let’s begin, hm?”

Scared, El did as best she could to put a little distance between her and Brenner.

“Your powers,” he said, reaching into his bag and bringing out something she’d hoped she would never see again—electrodes. “The police chief said you’ve been having difficulties for some time now. How long, exactly?”

Eleven looked from the electrodes to Brenner’s waiting face. She shook her head.

“Eleven,” he said, his tone changing to the all-too-familiar way from

when he ran the lab-and her life. "It's very important that you answer me." Picking up the electrodes and preparing to place them on her head, he again asked, "How long has this been happening?"

Again, Eleven didn't answer. She saw his face immediately change from caring and curious to harsh and cold as he reached for her.

Harnessing all of her strength, El kicked at the chair Brenner sat in, eliciting a surprised yelp from him as he crashed to the floor. Not wasting time, Eleven got to her feet and struggled as best she could to get out of the room. Once she got to the door, she stumbled into the dark hallway and looked for which way to go next.

"Eleven!" Brenner bellowed from the room behind her.

Determined, El ambled down the hallway.

Back at the Byers home, Hopper and Joyce were emerging from the trees, heading back to the house.

"Still no answer from anyone," Joyce said, holding the walkie.

"They're probably already inside," Hopper said.

Shrugging, Joyce asked, "So now what do we do?"

"I don't know," Hopper answered as they arrived at the Byers' back door. "Maybe I'll call the department, see if we can get more people canvassing the woods."

Stepping inside, the two were greeted with Murray, sitting at the table with an ice pack on the back of his head; and Sam Owens, who sat across from him, drink in hand.

"So?" Murray asked as Joyce closed the door. "Any luck?"

"No," Hopper answered. "Did the kids get back already?"

"What?"

“The kids, where are they?”

“They didn’t come back,” Owens answered, frowning. “Were they supposed to?”

“Shit,” Hopper muttered, taking the walkie from Joyce. “Mike? Steve? Where are you?” he asked into the Supercomm.

When there still wasn’t a response, Joyce asked “You don’t think...”

“Mike? Steve? Dustin, Lucas,” Hopper said into the walkie.

Finally, the walkie crackled to life, with a young girl’s voice saying “Yeah?”

“Who...” Hopper began.

“Max,” Joyce said.

“Where are you guys? How come nobody’s answering?” he asked.

“We’re heading to Starcourt,” came another voice; Dustin’s this time.

“What? Why’re you going to the mall?”

“Long story,” Dustin explained. “We got a code red from El.”

“A code...what the hell are you talking about?”

“Just meet us at the mall,” Dustin answered. “Over and out.” With that, the walkie clicked off.

“Did that son of a bitch just hang up on me?” Hopper asked, lowering the walkie.

“Sounds like it,” Murray answered.

“Dammit,” Hopper said. “Let’s go.”

Steve and Robin’s car swerved into the empty parking lot of Starcourt, the building looking like a fortress in the dark of night.

Steve parked his BMW in front of the mall, with Robin parking her car right behind his.

“Give me the bat,” Steve said to Robin when everyone was out of the car. She handed it to him without hesitation.

“What if he’s not in there?” she asked.

“He is,” Mike said. “*El* is.”

“Look,” Steve said, “Whether they’re in there or not, you all stay behind me, got it? The last thing I need is Hopper or Mrs. Byers killing *me* because you kids got stupid and got yourself hurt.”

“He’s just a scientist,” Lucas said. “If he doesn’t have a gun, we should be okay.”

“I’m sorry,” Robin said, speaking up. “But have we all forgotten that there’s a monster living here? Shouldn’t we wait for the police or somebody?”

“No,” Mike said. “We need to get in there and make sure *El*’s okay.”

“Can’t you call her,” Steve asked, “With your little mind-connection thingy?”

“It doesn’t work like that,” Mike explained. “Besides, don’t you think I would’ve done that by now?” Turning towards the mall, he said “Come on. Let’s go.”

Led by Steve and Mike, the Party made their way towards the mall’s entrance. Just as they got to the door, though, Robin said “We should split up.” When Dustin snorted in derision, she looked confused. “What?”

“Have you *ever* seen a horror movie?” he asked. “Splitting up *never* works out.”

“That’s rule number one on things you don’t do,” Lucas explained.

“The mall’s too big,” Robin countered. “There’s no way we can cover the whole mall that fast; there’s two floors *plus* a basement. But if we

split up, it'll be easier."

The group began to argue before Steve interrupted, saying "Look, she's got a point. Okay?"

"I doubt he's going to the second floor," Lucas said. "Maybe one group takes the basement, another group takes the main floor?"

"Fine," Steve said. "Dustin, Mike, Will, come with me, we'll take the basement. Robin, take Lucas and big red and look on the main floor."

"Max," she told him.

"Right. Use these," he said, holding up a walkie. "Let us know if you find him."

"What if we see that thing?" Max asked.

Steve shrugged. "Run your ass off."

Eleven dashed around a corner, desperate to put as much room as she could between her and Brenner. The disorientation that she'd experienced when she first woke was somewhat beginning to fade, but she was still at a disadvantage: not only was she somewhat groggy, but she had no idea where she was.

She knew she had to still be in the mall, but nothing she saw looked familiar. The dark hallways she scurried down didn't have any store names, or windows, or anything that would help her identify her location.

Did Mike hear me? she asked herself. She'd felt so weak when she'd gone into the void, she didn't know if he had heard her, let alone if what she'd seen was real. And Hopper; as furious as she'd been with him about bringing Brenner here, she sure could use him-her *true* father-right now. All she wanted right now was to be back home with her friends and her family.

She was hit, suddenly, with a wave of nausea and dizziness, and she stopped near a coat rack and multiple mannequins to catch her

breath. No sooner had she rested, when she heard Brenner's voice call out, "Eleven!"

As quick as she could, El got behind the mannequins, blocking her from being seen in the hallway. A moment later she saw Brenner, flashlight in hand, walking her way.

"This is no way to act, Eleven," he spoke, slowing his walk. "You're sick. Unwell. The longer you play this game, the sicker you become." He turned the flashlight, the beam going over her head. Curious, he began to walk towards her hiding spot.

"But if you come with me," he continued, "we can get to the bottom of this. I can help you. I can make you whole again. But I need you to come with me." El slunk back as Brenner reached for the group of mannequins that were shielding her from view. He stopped, however, pulling his hand back in surprise; he'd cut himself on one of the figures. Shining the light on his hand, El could see the blood dripping from his wound as he backed up into the hall.

Eleven watched as he stood in the hallway, looking left to right, before finally he sighed and continued his search, disappearing from view.

El made sure to stay where she was for a few minutes, for fear of being seen. When she felt enough time had passed, she quietly slipped out from between the mannequins.

Going the opposite way from Brenner, she did the best she could to stick to the shadows and move quietly. The last thing she needed, she knew, was to bump into something and cause a commotion.

As she neared another corner, she stopped, seeing a beam of light coming her way and voices. Frightened, she backed up onto the wall behind her as the voices got closer.

"Jeez, how big is Starcourt?" a familiar voice asked.

"Big," another voice answered.

"Lucas, come in," came another voice-one she'd been dying to hear-said. "What's your status? Over."

Eleven stepped out of the shadows and into the beam of the flashlight. "Mike," she said, her voice sounding weaker than she expected.

"El!" he said in hushed excitement, rushing over and hugging her. She clutched him just as hard, fighting the urge to cry.

"You heard me," she told him.

Mike nodded, pulling away as Eleven noticed the tears building in his eyes. "Are you okay?" he asked, looking her over. "Did he hurt you?"

"Where is he?" Steve asked, looking up and down the hallway.

"I don't know where he is," she answered. To Mike, she said, "I'm...okay."

Dustin took the walkie from Mike. "Alright, guys, we've got her," he said into the Supercomm. "Let's meet back at the rendezvous point."

"Copy," Lucas answered. "Over and out."

"Come on," Steve said, turning back the way they came. "This way."

Mike took Eleven's hand, and the group made their way out of the mall's basement and back to the first floor of Starcourt Mall. Robin, Max, and Lucas were waiting for them at the fountain. Max, seeing El, ran over and wrapped her friend in a hug.

"Well, that was fast," Robin said to Steve.

"Where's Brenner?" Lucas asked.

"We didn't see him," Will answered.

"Let's get out of here before he comes back," Mike said.

There was a noise behind them, the cocking of a gun, and the group turned in time to see Martin Brenner emerge from the basement. "Leave her," he said, eyeing Eleven but pointing the weapon at the group.

Clutching the bat, Steve moved so he was in between Brenner and the group. "I don't think so, whitey," he said.

Brenner looked Steve over before turning to El. "They can't save you, Eleven," he told her. "You need to come with me now."

"She's not going anywhere," Lucas said, taking out his wrist rocket. Next to him, Mike moved in front of El.

"Guys..." Dustin began.

"Not now, Dustin," Steve said back.

"No, *look* ," the curly-haired boy said, pointing at Brenner. "He's bleeding."

"Yeah? So?" Steve asked.

"The monster," Mike said softly.

There was a faint roar from somewhere nearby, and the group all lowered their guards for a moment as their eyes scanned their surroundings.

Brenner lowered his weapon as he searched for the source of the sound.

"El," Max whispered, "Do you think you can..."

The roar got louder, and as the Party watched, the demodog they'd seen earlier in the day ran from the basement and, before Brenner could fire, it launched itself at him, knocking him to the ground. The group looked away as the demodog began to attack him.

"Run!" Mike said.

Before they could, though, there was a loud *bang bang* as a gun went off. Looking behind them, the group saw Hopper (with Joyce, Murray, and Sam Owens right behind him) enter the pavilion, gun trained on the monster.

The demodog whimpered as it staggered, trying to stand again before

Hopper shot it once more.

“You guys alright?” he asked, looking at the teens.

“Yeah,” Mike answered, while Dustin, Will, Lucas, and Max nodded.

“ No ,” Robin replied.

Still aiming his gun at the demodog’s body, Hopper made his way over to it. The demodog lay still, seemingly dead. Hopper tapped it with his foot before holstering his gun. Looking over his shoulder at the group, he nodded his head.

Letting go of Mike’s hand, El made her way over to the bodies of the demodog and Brenner.

“El,” Hopper began.

Ignoring the beast, she instead looked at the body of Brenner. The doctor’s throat had been slashed by the demodog, and his lifeless eyes stared at the ceiling. Sniffling, she asked, “Is he...”

“He’s gone,” Hopper acknowledged.

El nodded, as Hopper wrapped an arm around her. “Let’s go home,” he said.

Notes for the Chapter:

The next chapter will be an epilogue.

11. Better Days

Good Morning, Hawkins, this is Brenda Wood with your morning news.

*We start this morning with news from Starcourt Mall. Last night, police received an anonymous call alerting them to some possible danger on the premises. According to officials, some sort of wild animal had made its way into the building's basement and attacked a worker. We're still waiting on details on who was attacked as well as exactly *what* animal had made its way into Starcourt. But for the time being, Starcourt has been closed as police investigate the disturbance.*

One month later-

It took some time, but eventually things returned to normalcy. Starcourt Mall reopened its doors a few days after the incident with Brenner and the demodog, with the walls in a particular section of the basement getting a new coat of paint and the hole that the monster had used being cemented over.

As far as the public was concerned, a bear cub had made its way in and attacked an exterminator. Business went on as usual.

Steve and Robin both ended up quitting working at *Scoops Ahoy!* After what she'd seen at Starcourt, Robin wasn't sure she'd ever set foot in a mall again. Steve, on the other hand, had just grown sick of slinging ice cream. The two ended up finding jobs at Family Video, where they soon agreed that renting movies beat dealing with ice cream (and mall monsters).

With a little rest and help from Sam Owens Eleven was finally able to heal. Sam Owens' final diagnosis was that over the past two years since opening the gate, she'd overextended herself. After going a while without using her abilities, they were now back at ninety percent.

Brenner's body was recovered by the Department of Energy, and given a burial at an undisclosed location. Eleven had mixed feelings; she was happy that he wasn't a threat anymore, but a very small part of her was sad to see her one time and terrible father figure gone.

Towards the end of August, Hopper and Eleven left the cabin and moved into their new house in Hawkins. The Party helped El decorate her new room, and Joyce threw the two Hoppers a housewarming party soon after the move.

Once his head healed, Murray Bauman returned to Illinois, changing his phone number once he got home.

Sam Owens went back to his government job, letting Hopper know that if he needed him, he'd be there.

Slowly but surely, things got back to normal.

On the first Saturday of September, days before the Party was set to begin high school, Mike picked Eleven up to go on a picnic. His backpack loaded with goodies (and plenty of Eggos), he arrived at the new Hopper home a little after noon.

El was already outside waiting for him, sitting on the steps in her denim shorts and bright red shirt.

"Hey, El," Mike said as she stood, smiling at seeing him. "Are you ready?"

"Yes," she replied, climbing onto the back of his bike. "You never said where we were going."

"It's a surprise," he said, pushing off and beginning their journey.

They talked briefly as they rode through downtown Hawkins; mostly about their friends and what they'd been up to. The picnic had a few purposes; for both of them, it was the chance to have some time with just the two of them, especially after the events of the last month.

For El, it was a break from worrying about her first foray into school

next week (the fact she got to be with her favorite person just made it that much better).

For Mike, he was finally going to tell Eleven how he felt; that he loved her. Although he'd sworn he would tell her earlier than today, he'd wanted to wait for El to fully recover and make a day out of it.

So here they were.

It took longer than expected, but Mike finally got them to their destination; a lake that Eleven was unfamiliar with. As Mike slowed his pedaling, Eleven again asked about verification of their location.

"This, uh," Mike began, his bike coming to a stop. Planting his foot down to balance them, he said "This is Lover's Lake. I wanted somewhere nice for our picnic, and Nancy recommended it."

Taking Mike's hand, Eleven got off the bike. Looking around, she said, "It's beautiful."

Mike smiled, happy she liked it, as he took off the backpack he wore and began emptying it of its contents: a blanket for the two to sit on, pre-warmed Eggo waffles, sandwiches, and cans of Coke. They set up for their picnic and soon began eating the meal Mike had brought.

"How're you feeling today?" Mike asked.

She shrugged. "Not bad. Still...nervous."

"About school?"

"Yes," she said, nodding as she chewed a waffle.

"You're gonna do great, El. As smart as you are, you'll be blowing past us in no time."

She smiled. "You're only saying that because you're my boyfriend, Mike."

"No," he responded. "I mean...I probably would, but I mean it. El, you're a lot smarter than you give yourself credit for. You work hard, you don't give up. And for someone who basically didn't have school

for the first part of your life, you've made a lot of progress. High school is going to be different for all of us, but we're all gonna have each other-you, me, Lucas, Max, Dustin, and Will. We'll figure it out together."

"Promise?"

Mike nodded. "Promise."

El blushed. "Thank you, Mike."

Though Eleven *was* nervous about the prospect of school, she'd also come to enjoy buying supplies for ninth grade. She spent a few minutes talking about the pens, pencils, and folders she'd bought yesterday with Max, as well as the new clothes she and Nancy had bought.

When she'd finished, Mike hesitantly asked "What about your powers? How're they doing?"

"Better," El said. Looking at one of the empty Coke cans they'd gone through, she focused on it and, after a second, the can crumpled into a flat cylinder.

"That's great," Mike said, smiling. Since Dr. Owens' diagnosis, Eleven was reluctant to use her powers at all, for fear of nosebleeds or passing out. The fact that she was able to use them to demonstrate their strength told Mike she was getting better. "Hopefully you won't have to use them on anything for a while," Mike added.

"Yeah," she said, her eyes looking down.

Mike frowned. "What's wrong?"

She sighed. "I...didn't tell you why I wanted to fight the...demodog."

He shrugged. "I thought you just wanted to help us, El."

"I did," she said, glancing up for a second before looking down again. "But...I also..." She paused.

"What is it?" Mike asked, reaching and holding her hand.

"I thought...if my powers were gone..." Her eyes looking at him, she said "I wouldn't be useful anymore."

When Mike began to counter, she continued, saying "I've always had them, Mike. It felt...different...when they didn't work. Bad different."

Slowly, Mike nodded his head. "I guess I get it. It'd be like if I, I don't know, didn't have my nose or something."

El scrunched her own nose. "That's weird, Mike."

"I know," he said, grinning. "But you're more than your powers, El, you know that. We all care about you whether you have them or not."

"I know," she said, finally smiling.

Mike took a deep breath, ready to say what he'd been meaning to say. "Some of us even, you know... *love* you, with or without them."

Eleven smiled. "Hopper?"

"Well, *yeah*, but...I was talking about...about me."

Her eyes widened. "Mike...?"

Leaning closer and holding both of her hands, he said "I love you, El."

Eleven smiled wide before she closed the distance between them, pressing her lips to his. Pulling away after a moment, she softly said "I love you too, Mike."

Mike smiled, resting his forehead on hers.

Hours later, the Party met up in Mike's basement to decide what to do with their remaining moments of summer; starting with that night.

"We could play D & D," Will suggested.

Mike, on the couch next to Eleven, shook his head. "I haven't written a campaign in, like, forever, Will."

"I know," Will answered. "I made one up."

"You made up a campaign?" Lucas, snacking on chips at the game table, asked.

"Well, we haven't played all summer; I got tired of waiting," Will said, shrugging.

"No, let's do something else," Max, sitting next to El, said. "How about we go see a movie?"

"Like what?" Lucas asked.

"I don't know," Max said, looking around for the newspaper. Finding one, she began to search for the movies that were showing at The Hawk. Like Robin and Steve, the Party was now a little wary of going back to Starcourt.

"What do you think, El?" Mike asked the girl whose head rested on his shoulder. "What do you want to do?"

El shrugged, smiling slightly to herself. She'd missed this-being with her friends, and the small things like deciding what to do. It felt good to have things returning to normal again. "I don't know," she replied to Mike.

"We could rent something," Dustin said. "Steve and Robin are working tonight."

"Ooh! Let's go see *Teen Wolf*," Max suggested.

"Is that the one with the guy from *Back to the Future*?" Mike asked.

"Yeah. I heard it's funny."

"Isn't it a horror movie?" Lucas asked.

"I don't think so," Max said.

“Fine with me,” Dustin said.

“What about my campaign?” Will asked.

“We can play it tomorrow,” El proposed.

“Yeah, we can do like the old days,” Lucas said, chiming in. “We can get a pizza. Ooh, with olives!”

“Since when does anyone eat olives?” Dustin argued, heading towards the stairs.

“Don’t be mad at me because *I* have refined taste,” Lucas shot back, going to the stairs, too.

“Olives aren’t refined, you moron, they’re plants that don’t belong on pizza!” Dustin said as the two disappeared upstairs.

“Simpletons,” Max said, standing and going upstairs, too.

Will stood to follow, but before he left, Mike said “Will, I’m looking forward to your campaign tomorrow.”

Will smiled. “Thanks. I’ll see you guys upstairs?”

Mike nodded, as he and El began to get off the couch. Turning to El, Mike asked, “You ready?”

El paused, as she took it all in: the sounds of her friends upstairs, the boy who loved her (and who she loved right back) holding her hand. The life she had here with Hopper, a life that was full of people who loved and cared about her. Having a real home, and a real life; it was almost too good to be true. But she knew it was true, it was real, it wasn’t a dream.

And she couldn’t be happier.

Giving Mike’s hand a gentle squeeze, she said “Ready.”

The two smiled at each other, off to meet their friends upstairs.

Notes for the Chapter:

Thanks for reading!